

**07/15/21 Thursday**

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US Has Produced its First in New Line of Updated 475-Kiloton Thermonuclear Warheads  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The United States is expected to spend more than \$1.2 trillion over the next three decades updating its nuclear arsenal, nearly all of which is more than 30 years old, dating back to the Cold War. However, some of the more recent and pricey additions have already been cut from the budget, like a sea-launched cruise missile.

The National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), a semi-autonomous agency of the US Department of Energy, [announced on Tuesday](#) that the first W88 Alt 370 had been completed at the Pantex Plant, a site in northern Texas where most of the US' nuclear weapons are assembled. While the Pentagon is responsible for deciding how its nuclear weapons will be designed, the NNSA is responsible for actually assembling them.

"This accomplishment is the culmination of over a decade of work," Acting NNSA Administrator Charles Verdon said in the news release. "The W88 Alt 370 is a crucial part of Nation's strategy for the sea-based leg of the nuclear triad, and a testament to the Enterprise's ability to execute major modernization programs. As we continue to modernize the stockpile, the successes and lessons learned from this program will bolster our future warhead activities to provide a safe, secure, and reliable deterrent."

According to [The War Zone](#), which viewed an official fact sheet on the DoE website that has since [been taken down](#), the update "replaces the arming, fuzing, and firing subsystem, adds a lightning arrestor connector, and refreshes the conventional high explosives within the weapon to enhance nuclear safety and support future life extension program options."

The warhead is an updated version of the W88 thermonuclear warhead. Much about the W88 is not officially known, but [according to the Federation](#) of American Scientists, the warhead employs a novel egg-shaped primary fission stage, which is technically very challenging to produce, but makes it possible to put greater explosive power on a smaller overall warhead. Thus, more can fit atop a Multiple Independent Reentry Vehicle (MIRV) missile like the Trident II, which is carried by US ballistic missile submarines.

However, the number that can be put on any one missile is severely limited by the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), a bilateral treaty with Russia that the two nations renewed earlier this year, after former US President Donald Trump nearly allowed it to lapse.

The same warhead is also used on the B61 gravity bomb, which is deployed via strike aircraft or bombers.

About 400 of the W88s were built between 1988 and 1992 and the weapons have an estimated explosive yield of 475 kilotons, or more than 30 times the power of the bomb the US used to destroy Hiroshima, Japan, in August 1945 at the end of World War II.

The W88 is by far the largest warhead carried on the Trident II missile; the W76-1 has a yield of 90 kilotons, while the miniscule W76-2 has a yield of between 5 and 7 kilotons.

According to [The War Zone](#), the warheads were delayed by several years, after doubts surfaced about a \$5 off-the-shelf capacitor used in their construction, which the NNSA subsequently spent two years and \$850 million trying to improve. The better version now costs \$75.

Under former US President Donald Trump, the US began work on several new nuclear weapons, including a sea-launched nuclear-tipped cruise missile and a miniaturized version of the W76 nuclear warhead, the latter of which was completed. US President Joe Biden [has faced pressure](#) to conduct a Nuclear Posture Review and reconsider many of the Trump-era programs. While no such review has yet been published, the latest version of the Department of Defense appropriations bill for fiscal year 2022, which was approved by the House Appropriations Committee [earlier this week](#), has dropped the proposed sea-launched cruise missile-nuclear (SLCM-N).

Even before Trump, the US was slated to spend \$1.2 trillion updating its existing warheads and delivery systems over the next few decades. That includes not just the W88 Alt 370 program, but also the B83-1 gravity bomb, the B-21 Raider bomber, the Columbia-class submarine, the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent intercontinental ballistic missile, and the Long Range Standoff Weapon (LRSO) cruise missile.

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'US Out of Haiti': Protesters at US State Dept HQ Oppose Sending Police, Troops After Moise Killing

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The last time a Haitian president was assassinated, in 1915, US Marines occupied Haiti for 19 years, looted the country's gold reserve, and backed a military dictatorship that killed an estimated 15,000 Haitians - just one of numerous interventions in the Black Republic by the US to ensure its interests are protected.

Dozens of protesters demonstrated outside the US Department of State offices in Washington, DC, on Thursday against US involvement in Haitian affairs, including the question still being weighed by the Biden administration about whether or not to deploy troops to Haiti, as the government there has requested.

In the aftermath of the July 7 assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse, who was allegedly [slain in his home](#) by a hit squad of 26 Colombian and two American gunmen, the acting government appealed to the United States and United Nations for help. While Washington has sent FBI and Department of Homeland Security officials to Port-au-Prince to evaluate how they can help, it has [not yet decided](#) whether it will deploy troops to the island nation, as it has done many times in the past - and often without the consent of the Haitians. The protest was called by the Black Alliance for Peace, a black-led group which "seeks to recapture and redevelop the historic anti-war, anti-imperialist, and pro-peace positions of the radical black movement," according to [its website](#). However, several other protest groups were

also present, including women-led peace group Code Pink and the Act Now to Stop War and End Racism (ANSWER) Coalition.

Erica Caines, a member of the coordinating committee of the Black Alliance for Peace and co-editor of the blog Hood Communist, told Sputnik that “regardless of the circumstances around the assassination, we do not want US intervention in Haiti.”

“We understand that the US, alongside the Core Group and OAS, and all pan-European powers, have consistently been in Haiti, so when talking about intervention, we have to understand that those powers have never left, they’ve always been there,” Caines said.

“They’ve been there before the assassination and they’re still there. And we know that most recently, the referendum for the constitution was pushed back, so we do understand that these are all major issues that are going to determine the livelihood of Haitians in Haiti and we’re here to say, unequivocally, that no US intervention and that the Haitian people are allowed and that they have the right to self-determine,” she added.

She pointed to the UN’s decision to recognize Claude Joseph, the former acting prime minister whose replacement was appointed just a day before Moïse’s assassination, as the country’s de facto leader as an example of this meddling.

“When we look at what the UN just did with the closed UN meeting that decided that the prime minister was just going to just extend [his term] and be the temporary leader of Haiti, you also have to remember who he is and his connection to NED, the National Endowment for Democracy,” a soft power front group for the CIA.

Arturo Griffiths from the Claudia Jones School for Political Education in Washington, DC, said that the struggles of working-class people in Haiti and in the United States are directly connected, especially since there are so many Haitians working in DC, which is why his organization was protesting outside the State Department.

“The same enemy that the Haitian people are getting is the same enemy that we have here. No question about it... We need to unite all the struggles, to make sure that all the struggles come together. We can’t have separate struggles, we have to have togetherness, because the world needs the working-class struggle of the United States,” Griffiths told the crowd. “If the working-class struggle of the United States does not get stronger, we’re not going to be able to help the rest of the world. That’s the reality. We need the working class and the people to start getting together because the fight is not only here, but is international, too.”

Indeed, just days after Moïse’s killing, protests erupted in nearby Cuba, where the US has been trying to overthrow the communist government since 1960. There are [extremely strong indicators](#) that the US helped orchestrate the demonstrations, which received extensive media attention in strong contrast to the mass demonstrations [against Moïse’s government](#) going on in Haiti for months before his death. Those protests, too, demanded the US not intervene in Haitian affairs.

In addition, the hit squad allegedly hired to kill Moïse was composed [mostly of Colombian](#) ex-military figures, many of whom were reportedly trained by the US via partnership programs, and the two Americans, according to media reports, were [former US federal](#) police informants. Venezuelan National Assembly Speaker Jorge [Rodriguez also said](#) that Miami-based CTU Security, the group contracted for the hit, was also responsible for the failed assassination attempt on Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in August 2018 using explosive drones, and

was also connected to the failed 2020 plot to kidnap officially [called Operation Gideon](#), but more colloquially known as the Bay of Pigs.

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US Troop Deployment to Haiti 'Not On the Agenda at This Moment', Biden Says  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Just hours after the assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse, the de facto Haitian government quietly requested troop deployments by the US and United Nations to defend the country's essential infrastructure. However, the primary reason the US has so far rejected the request is reportedly because it was "confusing."

"With regard to the circumstances [in] which we would send military troops to Haiti, we're only sending American Marines to our embassy to make sure they are secure and nothing is out of whack at all," US President Joe Biden said at a press conference in Washington, DC, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Thursday.

"But the idea of sending American forces into Haiti is not on the agenda at this moment," he added.

The government of acting Haitian Prime Minister Claude Joseph made its request for troops [public on July 9](#), but [according to Reuters](#), which viewed copies of [two letters sent](#) by the government to the US and UN, the request had first been made privately two days earlier. Congressional sources [told The Hill](#) that the request was ambiguous about several things, including whether or not Joseph's government was requesting police or troops, due to the fact that "gendarmerie" can refer to either.

However, the US has already [sent several officials](#) from the FBI and US Department of Homeland Security to the Caribbean nation to help with the investigation of Moïse's murder, as well as \$5 million in supplemental funding for the Haitian National Police (PNH).

A US troop deployment to Haiti is unpopular in both nations: since [early this year](#), when the US backed Moïse's claim to have a presidential term one year longer than the supreme court had ruled, Haitians demonstrating in mass protests have demanded the US stop meddling in Haitian affairs. Earlier on [Thursday, protesters](#) outside the US State Department headquarters in Washington, DC, also demanded the US, as well as the Organization of American States Core Group and the United Nations, stop intervening in Haiti and to let Haitians sort out the issue themselves.

Moïse was slain early in the morning on July 7 by a team of gunmen who stormed his home in a Port-au-Prince suburb. His wife, Martine, was [badly wounded](#) but survived and is recovering in a hospital in Miami, Florida. According to the PNH, [the squad included](#) 26 Colombians, most of them ex-military, and [two Americans](#); 20 of them have been arrested and the charged, while the rest were killed in gun battles with police.

On Thursday, PNH chief Leon Charles said that Dimitri Herard, the head of Moïse's security detail, had been removed from his post, interrogated, and placed in isolated detention. However, Charles dismissed claims the killing had been a government inside job as "a lie."

The US has repeatedly intervened in Haiti since it won its independence from France in 1804, including a 19-year military occupation from 1915 to 1934 under which 15,000 Haitians were killed, and more recently in 2004 when the US overthrew President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

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Pentagon Confirms ‘Small Number’ of Colombians Detained for Moise Murder Received US Training  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

On Thursday, US President Joe Biden said sending US troops to Haiti, as the de facto government has requested, is “not on the agenda at this moment,” although the US has sent senior FBI and Department of Homeland Security officials to the Caribbean nation to assist police in their investigation of Haitian President Jovenel Moise’s murder.

The US Department of Defense has confirmed that some of the Colombian ex-soldiers arrested in Haiti last week in connection with Moise’s killing had received training from the US military during their time in the Colombian military.

“A review of our training databases indicates that a small number of the Colombian individuals detained as part of this investigation had participated in past US military training and education programs, while serving as active members of the Colombian Military Forces,” Pentagon spokesperson Lt. Col. Ken Hoffman told [the Washington Post](#) on Thursday.

He added that US foreign military training is intended to promote “respect for human rights, compliance with the rule of law, and militaries subordinate to democratically elected civilian leadership.”

Haitian National Police (PNH) Chief Leon [Charles has said](#) his forces arrested 18 Colombians believed to be part of a 28-man commando that stormed Moise’s house early on the morning of July 7, killing him and wounding his wife, Martine. According to Colombian military authorities, 17 of them were former soldiers, having left the service between 2018 and 2020. He has not since commented on the three men later apprehended.

[Two Americans](#) were also arrested, one of whom is a former security guard at the Canadian embassy in Port-au-Prince and another who is a former informant for the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), a federal police force that also works closely with Colombian authorities as part of the US’ War on Drugs.

Since Moise’s killing, acting Prime Minister Claude Joseph has been recognized by the US and United Nations as the de facto leader of the country, although his successor was appointed by Moise just a day before Moise was killed. Joseph declared a state of emergency and appealed to the US and UN for support, including deployments of troops to defend key infrastructure against armed gangs. While the US has agreed to send some [senior law enforcement](#) help and provide the PNH with \$5 million in funding, [Biden said Thursday](#) that a troop deployment was not being considered.

The US has worked closely with the Colombian military and police since the early 20th century, from crushing United Fruit workers’ strikes in the 1920s and 1930s to supporting Colombia’s

fight against a communist insurgency during the Cold War and cracking down on [drug traffickings](#) since the 1970s. More recently, Colombia has been a major thorn in the side of Venezuela, serving as a base from which to [infiltrate the country](#).

Colombian military commander Gen. Luis Fernando [Navarro told reporters](#) last week that “the recruitment of Colombian soldiers to go to other parts of the world as mercenaries is an issue that has existed for a long time, because there is no law that prohibits it. There are a significant number of Colombian soldiers in Dubai, for example.”

Gen. Eduardo Zapateiro, head of the Colombian Army, told Reuters that Colombian soldiers are often recruited as mercenaries after their obligatory service is completed “because of all their experience.”

“It’s a shame because we train them for other things,” he added.

However, that training has also been blamed for the [deadly police violence](#) used against protesters on Colombia’s streets earlier this year, in which as many as 42 people may have been killed and hundreds were wounded.

Sean McFate, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council think tank, told Reuters that copycat mercenary groups imitating the US firm Blackwater have popped up in recent years, many of which are staffed by soldiers drafted from rural communities whose only marketable skills are their training with weapons or in urban counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations. “They are mercenaries in every sense of the word,” he said.

As [Sputnik has reported](#), US-trained troops often go on to less reputable futures, such as African troops trained by US Africa Command, who are responsible for a slew of coups d’etat across the continent since AFRICOM was formed in 2008.

Haitian and Colombian authorities have identified [five security companies](#) associated with Moise’s death, one of which is CTU Security, based in Miami, Florida. Colombian National Police chief Gen. Jorge Luis Vargas told reporters on Wednesday that CTU had bought 19 members of the commando tickets to Haiti prior to the operation.

According to Venezuelan National Assembly [Speaker Jorge Rodriguez](#), CTU has also been implicated in several plots against Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro as well, including the 2018 assassination attempt with exploding drones, and Operation Gideon, the 2020 attempt to kidnap and extradite Maduro to stand trial in the US on drug trafficking charges. Silvercorp USA, another private security contractor, was [the primary force](#) behind the latter operation, having been contracted for the job by self-proclaimed interim president Juan Guaido.

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UK House of Commons Unanimously Passes Motion for Diplomatic Boycott of 2022 Olympics in Beijing  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Last week, the British Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) issued a report calling for members of the government to partially boycott the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, China, over

alleged human rights violations perpetrated by the Chinese government in Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region. The US is also mulling a diplomatic boycott.

The UK House of Commons unanimously passed a motion on Thursday urging the British government to formally stage a diplomatic boycott of the upcoming Winter Olympics in Beijing, unless the Chinese government agrees to end the "atrocities" occurring in Xinjiang.

Conservative MP Tim Loughton, who is also a member of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC), asserted to colleagues that China's human rights abuses have been "normalized" and, with the help of the Olympics, could result in Beijing scoring a "major soft-power propaganda victory they crave."

"The government on the one hand speaks of industrial scale [human rights abuses taking place in the Uyghur Region](#), and on the other pursues ever deeper trade links with Beijing – even allowing our largest semiconductor manufacturer to be snapped up by a Chinese owned firm," Loughton said, referring to the recent acquisition of Newport Wafer Fab (NWF), the UK's largest semiconductor producer, by Nexperia.

While Nexperia is headquartered in the Netherlands, the semiconductor firm is owned in part by China's Wingtech - formerly known as Join-In.

Labour MP Afzal Khan argued on Thursday that Beijing has "ramped up its persecution of Uyghurs" within recent years.

"A diplomatic boycott would ensure that the UK doesn't turn a blind eye to industrial scale human rights abuses," Khan said. "The Olympic values of solidarity and non-discrimination are simply irreconcilable with the Chinese government's persecution of the Uyghur Muslims and other minority groups."

Dame Barbara Woodward, Britain's ambassador to the United Nations, asserted in May that evidence obtained on China's Uighur minority in its Xinjiang region "points to systematic criminalization of expressions of religion, discrimination against Uyghur language and culture, mass arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, incidences of torture and reports of widespread forced labor and sterilization."

China has maintained that its camps in Xinjiang are used to weed out potential terrorists. Just last week, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin pushed back against diplomatic boycott calls, condemning lawmakers' efforts as a "politicization of sports" that "will not succeed."

"China firmly opposes the politicization of sports and the interference in other countries' internal affairs by using human rights issues as a pretext," [Wang said](#). "Attempts to disrupt, obstruct and sabotage the preparation and convening of the Beijing Winter Olympic Games out of political motivation have been met with strong opposition from all sectors of the international community."

Despite the unanimous passage of the motion, it remains unclear if British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is on board, as he notably [expressed last week that he is "instinctively" against sporting boycotts](#). The prime minister highlighted that his country "led the world" in condemning the alleged human rights abuses in China.

Across the pond, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) has also urged colleagues to back a diplomatic boycott of the Olympics. The House Speaker declared that the US would lose its "moral authority" to speak about human rights violations if heads of state traveled from Washington, DC, to Beijing.

Additionally, the European Parliament has [passed a nonbinding resolution](#) that calls for members to boycott the 2022 Winter Olympics and impose further sanctions on China.

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Psaki Condemns 'Failed Ideology' of Cuban Government, Reveals WH Flagging 'Misinformation' for FB  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki's Thursday news conference touched on a variety of topics, including the position of US President Joe Biden's administration regarding recent protests in Cuba, as well as Washington's ongoing effort to combat "misinformation" and control the narrative when it comes to COVID-19 vaccines.

When questioned about Cuban protesters' grievances, Psaki made no mention of [the US' "genocidal" embargo](#) and contended to reporters that the current situation on the island is a direct result of communism's shortcomings.

"Communism is a failed ideology - and we certainly believe that," she said of US President Joe Biden's administration. "It has failed the people of Cuba. They deserve freedom. They deserve a government that supports them - whether that is making sure they have health and medical supplies, access to vaccines, or whether they have economic opportunity and prosperity."

"Instead, this has been a government - an authoritarian, communist regime - that has repressed its people and has failed the people of Cuba," Psaki added. "Hence, we're seeing them in the streets."

Psaki's condemnation of communism came just a day after she seemingly avoided mentioning the ideology by name.

When asked if Cubans were protesting because they "hate communism," the White House press secretary asserted that Cuban are "opposed to the oppression" and the "mismanagement" of the country's government.

"We certainly support their right to protest. We support their efforts to speak out against their treatment in Cuba," she told reporters on Wednesday.

Psaki's change in rhetoric threw some netizens for a loop, and made many question what kind of brand of "freedom" the US would bring to the island nation it slapped with crippling sanctions. During the same news conference on Thursday, the White House press secretary revealed that the administration has teamed up with Facebook, and is now flagging so-called "misinformation" while also tailoring content to align with federal COVID-19 vaccination efforts.

"We've increased disinformation research and tracking within the surgeon general's office. We're flagging problematic posts, for Facebook, that spread this information," Psaki noted.

She did not expound on White House criteria for determining what makes a social media post "problematic."

"We're working with doctors and medical professionals to connect to medical experts who are popular with their audiences," she added, noting that said content is "boosted" or promoted for more exposure on Facebook. "So, we're helping get trusted content out there."

Psaki declared that there are an estimated 12 individuals who are responsible for around 65% of all anti-COVID-19 vaccine misinformation on social media.

"All of them remain active on Facebook, despite some even being banned on other platforms, including ones that Facebook owns," she said, speaking of Facebook company subsidiaries such as Instagram.

Psaki's comments quickly elicited responses from thousands of netizens who appeared both confused and surprised by the press secretary's admission.

News of the White House's direct influence on Facebook content comes alongside the publication of US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy's public advisory on the "urgent threat of health misinformation." [According to a survey](#) conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and cited by the Surgeon General, 67% of unvaccinated adult respondents heard at least one myth about the COVID-19 vaccine and either believed it to be fact, or were unsure of its veracity. [The advisory document itself](#) sets forward a number of recommendations for those in the US, including everyday individuals, journalists, educators, researchers and the government.

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Megan Fox Fumes After Being Branded a Republican For Calling Trump a 'Legend'  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Megan Fox appeared on "Jimmy Kimmel Live" earlier this week and recounted her experience at UFC 264 in Las Vegas, Nevada with a slew of celebrities, including former US President Donald Trump. The 35-year-old actor divulged that she was in the same row as both Justin Bieber and Trump, whom she described as a well-received "legend" at the arena.

Less than two days after her appearance on "Jimmy Kimmel Live," Fox took to her official Instagram account to issue an open letter to the "uneducated" individuals attempting to use her comments on the late-night talk show as a pro-Trump endorsement.

"UHMMM... I DO NOT ALIGN MYSELF WITH ANY POLITICAL PARTY OR INDIVIDUAL POLITICIANS [sic]," the "Jennifer's Body" actor wrote in her Instagram story post on Wednesday. "I NEVER SAID DONALD TRUMP IS A LEGEND. I SAID HE WAS A LEGEND...IN THAT ARENA (KEY PART OF THE SENTENCE)."

Indeed, casual fans and stans alike appeared a bit confused and turned off by the 35-year-old's comments.

"THE ARENA WAS FILLED WITH UFC FIGHT FANS, MANY OF THEM CLEARLY REPUBLICAN BASED OFF THE INSANE CROWD REACTION HE RECEIVED WALKING INTO THE T-MOBILE VENUE," she added. "THAT WAS AN OBSERVABLE FACT. NOT MY OPINION."

"REALLY LOVING THIS UNEDUCATED, MID-EVIL, PITCH FORK CARRYING, BURN A WITCH AT THE STAKE MENTALITY THOUGH. THE WORLD NEEDS MORE OF THAT," Fox concluded, following her statement with a number of emojis, including a red kiss mark.

Despite the confusion about Fox's political leanings, the 35-year-old expressed in her full statement on Trump and his Secret Service that she was actually more concerned for her safety, as Trump was a "target" in her eyes.

"I was in a row with Bieber. Trump was also in my row," Fox recounted to guest-host Arsenio Hall with a smile. "I've never seen Secret Service in person before, so he had like 30 Secret Service with him and he was a legend! That arena, like, was very supportive of Trump when he came in."

She went on to express that she did not know what to make of the situation with Trump security detail, "because if someone is a target then I'm like, I could be harmed, like, because I'm adjacent to where he is."

"I was worried about my own safety," she concluded.

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California Becomes First US State to Adopt Guaranteed Income Program  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Unlike traditional government assistance programs in the US, a guaranteed income program does not stipulate how an individual may spend said funds. California's state-funded guaranteed income plan seeks to deliver monthly cash payments to pregnant individuals and young adults who have aged out of the foster care system.

With a 36-0 vote in the California State Senate, and a 64-0 vote in the State Assembly, lawmakers in the Golden State approved the nation's first state-funded guaranteed income program and set aside some \$35 million to be used for monthly cash payments to qualifying pregnant individuals and young adults who are no longer under foster care.

Details, such as the average monthly payment amount, remain unknown. Funding for the program will come directly from California taxpayers.

While the program received support from all California state lawmakers, a similar proposal in a less liberal state will likely encounter pushback from Republicans and other individuals with conservative values.

Many right-leaning opponents of guaranteed income programs argue that such a plan would chip away at the average American's worth ethic, and possibly create additional tax burdens that could negatively impact the economy, [Forbes reported](#).

Jon Coupal, president of the California-based Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, [argued to the Associated Press](#) that taxpayer funds would be better used for something such as scholarships, rather than a guaranteed income program.

"It's less offensive if it is targeted to people who truly need it," he argued.

Democratic California State Sen. Dave Cortese, who represents San Jose, asserted that the program will change the attitude of eligible individuals.

"It changes the philosophy from 'big brother government knows what's best for you,'" Cortese said. "We've been very prescriptive with that population as a state and as counties go. Look at

the failure. Half of them don't get their high school diplomas, let alone advance like other people their age."

The passage, first reported by the AP, took place on the same day some 35 million families in the US began receiving their child tax credit. US President Joe Biden declared in a Thursday speech that the child tax credit will change the lives of US children "for the better."

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Iraqi Officials Say US Held Talks on Troop Withdrawal But Biden White House Denies Remarks by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

A joint statement issued by American and Iraqi officials in April previously revealed that both parties agreed to the eventual withdrawal of US troops from the Middle Eastern nation; however, the pathway to the military exit was largely based on the time needed to train Iraqi troops to combat Daesh militants.

A dose of confusion was recently dished out, as commentary from the office of the Iraqi prime minister and the Biden administration's special Middle East coordinator sent mixed messages about a potential withdrawal of American troops from Iraq.

The lack of clarity on a potential troop removal from Iraq first emerged after the office of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi indicated in a Thursday statement that officials had discussed the "mechanisms for withdrawing combat forces from Iraq" with none other than Brett McGurk, who serves as the special coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa.

The statement, which was obtained by [Newsweek](#), further indicated that Thursday talks between al-Kadhimi and McGurk touched on "moving to a new phase of strategic cooperation that develops the relationship between the two countries and enhances Iraq's security and sovereignty."

Iraqi and American officials pinpointed on "coordination and joint cooperation in various fields, and preparations for holding the next round of strategic dialogue between Iraq and the United States of America," the statement continued, adding that efforts toward "expanding cooperation in the economic, cultural and trade fields" also led discussions.

However, when the Biden administration was contacted about the developments and timeline for a possible troop pullout, the claims were wholly rejected. An unidentified senior administration official informed the outlet that the statement regarding pulling US soldiers from Iraq were "not true."

The latest remarks on the subject come months after American and Iraqi officials released a joint [April statement](#) that noted both parties were in agreement with the eventual withdrawal of US service members, so long as Iraqi Security Forces were sufficiently given the capabilities to combat any threats from Daesh militants.

Moves to pull American troops out of Iraq were [previously undertaken](#) by the Obama administration in 2011 before the emergence of Daesh militants prompted former US President Barack Obama to [send troops back](#) to the region in 2014.

Although the Biden administration has worked to underscore the needed alliance between Iraqi and American forces to ensure regional stability, efforts have not been warmly welcomed by all, especially after the US-ordered January 2020 [assassination](#) of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Quds Force Commander, Major General Qassem Soleimani, and Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces Deputy Chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Amid the fallout of the US drone strike that killed the Iranian and Iraqi figures, the Iraqi Parliament voted in favor of ousting US troops stationed across Iraq. At the time, former US President Donald Trump slammed the move and threatened to impose sanctions against the nation.

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Two-Thirds of Southern Republicans Favor Seceding From US, Poll Finds  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

An earlier poll conducted in the wake of the deadly Capitol riot found many surveyed Republicans were in favor of seceding from the US at the time; however, officials have indicated that the sentiment has only increased over the last several months.

Two-thirds of Southern Republicans are in favor of breaking away from the US and establishing their own union with neighboring states, a [joint poll](#) conducted by YouGov and Bright Line Watch has revealed.

The findings, which were released on Wednesday, state that approximately 66% of surveyed Republicans across 13 of the US' southern states, including Texas, Georgia, Alabama and Florida, want to secede from the nation and construct their own union.

Of the same region, support for seceding was felt by 50% of Independents and just 20% of Democrats.

Pollsters outlined the Southern union as including the states: Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

The Mountain region, listed as including Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico, had the second-highest percentage of support from Republicans, with 43%.

As for Democrats, the highest tally in favor of secession - 47% - was recorded in the Pacific region, which includes Washington, Oregon, California and Alaska.

Comparing their results to a previous poll conducted on the same topic in January, officials determined that favoritism for breaking away from the US had significantly spiked across the American South.

"Yet rather than support for secession diminishing over the past six months, as we expected, it rose in every region and among nearly every partisan group," the survey found. "Even subordinate partisan groups appear to find secession more appealing now than they did last winter, though only increases for Democrats in the South, Heartland, and Mountain regions are statistically discernible at the 0.05 significance level."

However, pollsters went on to warn that “the broad and increasing willingness of respondents to embrace these alternatives is a cause for concern.”

The results are compiled from two surveys that were conducted by YouGov between June 16 and June 26, and another poll by the Bright Line Watch between June 16 and July 2. In total, approximately 3,077 individuals were surveyed, of which 327 were identified as political scientists.

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No Coup for You - Cartoon

After former US President Donald Trump’s 2020 reelection loss, a bevy of rumors surfaced that the leader would do anything to stay in power as he voiced unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud. Now, among those allegations are claims that even military brass feared Trump would opt to undertake a coup in order to keep his hold on the White House.

Former US President Donald Trump addressed the public on Thursday to reject allegations that he had ever weighed the possibility of staging a coup in late 2020 in order to remain the US’ commander-in-chief.

“I never threatened, or spoke about, to anyone, a coup of our Government. So ridiculous,” Trump remarked in a [Telegram post](#). “I’m not into coups!”

However, Trump did go on to note that even if he had indeed planned such a move, “one of the last people I would want to do it with is General Mark Milley,” who the former president went on to deem an “overrated general” that wasn’t even “liked” by his predecessors.

Trump’s Thursday remarks surfaced in response to excerpts of a [forthcoming book](#) that stated military officials working within the Trump administration were growing concerned Trump was eyeing a potential [military coup](#) to overturn the 2020 election.

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US, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan Create New Quad Group to Promote Peace - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - The United States, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan will create a new quadrilateral diplomatic group to promote the Afghan peace process, stability and trade in the region, the State Department said on Friday.

"Representatives of the United States, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan agreed in principle to establish a new quadrilateral diplomatic platform focused on enhancing regional connectivity. The parties consider long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan critical to regional connectivity and agree that peace and regional connectivity are mutually reinforcing," the State Department said in a press release.

The parties see the establishment of the group as a means to bolster regional trade, build new transit routes and strengthen business ties, the release said.

The parties have agreed to hold a meeting in the coming months to discuss the details of their future cooperation, which is expected to be based on mutual consensus, the release said.

The security situation in Afghanistan has been deteriorating following the withdrawal most US military forces from the country, as the Taliban (outlawed in Russia) seizes new provinces every day. Since President Joe Biden announced his decision to withdraw from the country, American officials have been engaged in talks with countries neighboring on Afghanistan in search of ways to support the Afghan Defense Forces after the full pullout.

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US Retail Sales Up 0.6% in June, Rebounding After May Slump of 1.3% - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - US retail sales, a bellwether of consumer sentiment, rose by 0.6 percent in June, rebounding after a 1.3 percent decline in May, the Commerce Department said on Friday.

"Advance estimates of US retail and food services sales for June 2021, adjusted for seasonal variation and holiday and trading-day differences, but not for price changes, were \$621.3 billion, an increase of 0.6 percent from the previous month," a Commerce Department statement said.

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## ANALYSIS - Government Disunity, Slow Response to Economic Issues Fuel South Africa Unrest

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - The lack of unity and the failure to address economic problems facing South Africa are only adding to the unrest that has gripped the country following the incarceration of former President Jacob Zuma, analysts told Sputnik.

On July 7, Zuma turned himself in to begin serving a fifteen-month sentence for contempt of court after skipping a corruption trial. The news sparked protests and unrest which began in Zuma's home province of Kwa Zulu-Natal and has since expanded to South Africa's economic capital of Johannesburg in Gauteng.

### PROTESTS, CRIMINALITY AND LOOTING SPREES

The protests that erupted last week soon turned into riots complete with looting and acts of vandalism. An estimated 72 have died in clashes between police and protesters and rioters, according to local South African media reports, while 3,000 have been arrested.

Institute for Security Studies Senior Research Fellow for Conflict Prevention and Risk Analysis David Zounmenou told Sputnik that the current situation is a manifestation of deeper structural challenges facing South Africa.

"Among those challenges, one can find the factionalism within the ANC, the ruling party, persistent social and economic inequalities, soaring unemployment mainly among the young people," he said. "The incarceration of the former president... was a trigger that sparked the ongoing violence. Some would like to argue that protesters are asking for his release but criminal elements have also taken advantage of the state security weaknesses to wreak havoc." South African commentator and Africa Brand Summit Convener Solly Moeng echoed Zounmenou's assessment of the situation but emphasized that the unhappiness about Zuma's arrest in the beginning of the events grew into criminal activities.

"Obviously, people started looting, breaking into stores and supermarkets. And it's now more than just protesting the arrest of the former president," Moeng said. "There's a lot of criminality, there's a lot of opportunism as well. But there are also suspicions that all of these riots and looting around the country are being manipulated or organized by some faceless people who are supporters of the former president."

Moeng went on to say that there is a lot of poverty in South Africa and with the COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 and up to now, some businesses and livelihoods have been destroyed.

"People don't have income. So I think a lot of people saw this as an opportunity to go in there and steal stuff, food," he said. "But it's still not just food, they steal everything they can lay their hands on - TVs, bicycles - they take whatever they can take. The question is whether or not... they can sell the stuff and make money out of it. So there's a lot of opportunities."

Moeng compared the current unrest with the Black Lives Matters rioting in the United States last year, when people were breaking into stores and stealing things.

"So, you can't say everything that is happening is because they want to demand the release of the former president. And there's a lot of opportunities into it," he noted. "But also people are seeing an opportunity to get something for themselves. Someone was interviewed today, one of the looters, who said he doesn't care about politics but he says the politicians have stolen enough and what is being stolen by the people doesn't even match what has been stolen by the politicians, which is probably true. So there's a lot of anger. They're angry at a lot of things."

When asked whether the protests are still ongoing, Moeng said that they are but they should not be called "protests."

"They are not protests. Maybe we shouldn't even call them protests," he said. "These are looting sprees."

Besides, he added, during real protests the protesters demand specific things.

"These people are not demanding anything. They just see an opportunity to go into a mall, a shop or anything that has something of value," he said.

#### AUTHORITIES' RESPONSE TO ONGOING UNREST

Zounmenou and Moeng both criticized the authorities for failing to prevent the violence despite some previously circulated information and for not taking appropriate measures to stop it.

"South African Preventive machinery was deficient," Zounmenou said. "Rumors were circulating about plans to stage violent protests. It is observed that the state has taken time to respond. This has forced some communities to organize their own security."

Moeng also believes law enforcement is not doing enough.

"We've seen pictures and videos of police standing by, watching people looting, stealing, walking away with things," he explained. "People don't even hide their faces away from the media cameras anymore. They just do what they want... So they're not very strong in dealing with what is going on."

Zounmenou went on to say that the government needs to immediately step up its response strategy to protect public infrastructures, people and goods.

"The deployment of the defense forces is something but security forces remain overpowered by the crowd," he said. "Local authorities also have to step in to complement government's efforts."

Moreover, the expert said, the government needs to improve conflict prevention and develop long term structural responses to deep inequalities, unemployment, and corruption and measures to absorb the impact of COVID -19 on the most vulnerable in the society.

#### GOVERNMENT DISUNITY

Both Zounmenou and Moeng underscore the disunity in the current government of South Africa, stressing that it adds to the ongoing violence.

"I think the problem also is that the governing African National Congress in South Africa, the ANC, is divided. So the president might say one thing, but there are people in his own party who don't agree with him," Moeng said. "There are people in his own party who think that the former president should not have been arrested and want him to be released. The governing party is not even able to speak in one voice."

Moeng stressed that such disunity represents a big issue in addressing the crisis in the country.

"There's not a united stance by government and law enforcement authorities on what needs to be done," he said. "That is a big problem."

Moeng is positive, however, that South Africa can resolve the crisis on its own and is not at a point where international assistance or any kind of interventions are needed.

"I think that South Africa must deal with this thing. I think we need sufficient political will and unity in the government. If South Africans coming together to push back against it, we can deal with it," he said. "Obviously, it started about a week ago, it's too early to start talking about international intervention. If it goes on for a month or more, then maybe we must start saying, okay, maybe we need outside help."

He also added that if the country gets outside aid, it matters where it gets it from.

"If it's from the West, it's going to inflame the suspicions that the president is just being manipulated or used, that he is just a pawn of the West you know and doing everything to please his Western Masters," he explained. "If there's an intervention, maybe it could come from the African Union, but not from outside Africa. It shouldn't be China. It shouldn't be the west. It shouldn't be America."

Moeng also thinks that South Africa should not borrow any money including from the IMF and World Bank.

"South Africa for many years was able to survive without borrowing money from outside," he said. "Because of corruption, and that's the biggest thing also, there's been a lot of corruption. That's why this president is in prison. We've had to borrow money from the IMF, from the World Bank, from the New Development Bank, from the BRICS Bank over the past year. Now this country is more in debt than ever. I don't think that we need more debt... I don't think we need more money from outside, because we the people pay for that money, the politicians live large on it."

#### PROJECTIONS FOR CRISIS

Zounmenou believes that there is a serious threat that the violence could spread across the country from Kwa Zulu Natal, Johannesburg (Alexandra, Soweto), Mpumalanga and Limpopo among others.

"Already, food supply chains are in difficulties and petrol stations incapacitated," he said. "The most immediate risk is food shortage. Attacks on trucks delivering goods has disrupted the food supply chain. This has also cast a big shadow on the national leadership and exposed the weaknesses of the ANC."

Moeng also shared that the economic situation is already really bad, and particularly, in some provinces people cannot go buy food or fill up their cars with petrol.

"The local economic machinery is having difficulties," he said. "If this thing is going like this, supplies are going to be hard. These people have not only attacked stores and supermarkets, they've also attacked some of the logistics and the centers of merchandising for the big supermarkets. So, we should just hope that the authorities and people of South Africa push back against this. If it's going to be projected, then it's going to be really hard for people to find provisions for food, for basic necessities."

With respect to economic stability, Moeng said the country will do well if it can continue benefiting from earnings from sales of commodities which has boomed in the last six months.

"I think South Africa should have resources not to be pushed at a point where it must go and borrow more money from outside," he added.

Everything, he said, depends on how long this thing lasts and whether the government can put its food down firmly and properly.

"If it doesn't stop, if it keeps going, it is definitely not going to be good for the economy," he explained. "Investors are going to stay away."

Moeng believes, however, that the situation in the country will not get worse.

"As the days go on, there's more army, there's more military people on the road, in the streets," he noted. "I've already seen South Africans coming together to stop the looting."

Some people, Moeng added, are getting together to protect stores in supermarkets and places like the Mall of Africa, which is surrounded by the police and military.

"The military and the police cannot be everywhere - in the malls and shopping centers, everywhere. So when there's no protection, these people just come in and do their own thing," he explained.

Moeng added that the good thing is that the South Africans have been now beginning to come together to say enough is enough, that such criminal activities shouldn't happen.

Regarding Zuma's future, he said he was worried democracy would be weakened if simply set free.

"I don't think that the government or the judiciary system should release the former president. The democracy would be in danger if they let him out. He must stay there until he can legally be released," he added. "For me, South Africa has gone through some tests, and this is another test. You know all gold must go through fire before it shines."

After all the painful years of corruption under Zuma and his friends, he added, maybe this is what has to happen.

"I just hope that the president and the government doesn't fall for the pressure to release Zuma from prison too early. Because if they do, it's the end of this democracy. It's important that there is rule of law, and that's what the South African people want. They want to know that there is equality before the law, there is no favoritism," he said.

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RPT: REVIEW - Biden, Merkel Discuss Nord Stream 2 Possibilities in Europe, Climate Change

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and German Chancellor Angela Merkel during bilateral meetings at the White House discussed the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project along with other issues including climate change.

The Biden Administration has consistently stated its objection to the project, citing concerns over European and Ukrainian security, particularly energy security. However, the project continues to go forward, with construction upwards of 90% complete. Russian officials have repeatedly said the project is purely a commercial endeavor.

"We talked about Russia and Ukraine and in this context also about Nord Stream 2. We've come to different assessments as to what this project entails," Merkel said during a press conference that followed a bilateral meeting between the two leaders on Thursday, with Biden adding shortly thereafter that "good friends can disagree" on such matters.

Both sides, though, are preparing contingencies should agreements with Russia that ensure Ukrainian security post-construction fall through. Biden said that both the US and Germany have assigned teams to explore practical measures that could be taken and whether the project strengthens or weakens the region based on Russian actions.

Merkel added that the European community has "a number of instruments" such as sanctions at their disposal should it come to that, although she noted that she hopes no such decision has to be made. She and Biden agreed that in any scenario, Russia must not be allowed to use energy as a weapon with which to threaten and coerce neighboring countries.

The two heads of state also launched the US-Germany Climate and Energy Partnership, which aims to strengthen cooperation between the nations on addressing the threat of climate change and achieving a global net-zero future.

Additionally, they discussed the ongoing situations in Cuba and Haiti.

The meeting took place amid heavy flooding across Germany that has left approximately 1,300 people missing and at least 58 dead. Biden began the joint press conference by offering his condolences to the German people on behalf of the US.

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**RPT - Ankara Hopes Gulen to Be Extradited Under Biden - Turkish Ambassador**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - Ankara is in close contact with Washington on the possible extradition of US-based Islamic cleric Fethullah Gulen and hopes it will happen under the Biden administration, Turkish Ambassador to the United States Hasan Murat Mercan told Sputnik.

"Our relevant authorities and agencies are in close cooperation and dialogue with the American authorities, so I hope some day progress is made," Mercan said. "Of course, we want Fethullah Gulen (FETO) and his disciples to be extradited to Turkey... because Turkey and America are allies and we expect, we try to achieve that objective."

The Turkish government defines the transnational Islamic movement of Fethullah Gulen as FETO which is the acronym for Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organization. and has accused Gulen and his movement of being the main initiator of the failed coup attempt of 2016.

Gulen and members of his movement reject the allegations. They define themselves as the Hizmet (service) movement and oppose being defined as a terrorist organization. The US refuses to extradite the activist back home.

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**RPT: ANALYSIS - Corrupt Buying Practices, Sole Sourcing Perpetuate Pentagon's 'Disastrous' F-35 Program**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - The Defense Department still refuses to kill the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program despite two decades of costly overruns and technical issues because of the US government's corrupt sole-sourcing acquisition process, politics and the nature of the oligopolistic defense industry, analysts told Sputnik.

The F-35 program, originally approved by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his team in October 2001 under President George W. Bush, is projected to be the most expensive aircraft and military program in history, totaling at least \$1.5 trillion.

The aircraft continues to underperform in most key areas and be outfought by more than 40-year-old F-15 Eagle designs in combat tests, according to the analysts.

The aircraft's main defense contractor Lockheed Martin still has not resolved 864 software and hardware defects since the development phase finally ended years behind schedule in April 2018, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report on Tuesday.

In recent months, Lockheed Martin managed to rectify only eight of 872 defects that were pending in March, GAO Director Jon Ludwigson said in the report. The F-35 still cannot even be properly tested for operational use because its simulator system remains inadequate and has not yet been upgraded, the report said.

The aircraft are now admitted to cost at least \$100 million per plane, making them too expensive to even use in air superiority dog fighting or low flying ground support. In both roles, they remain inferior to the planes they were supposed to replace - the old F-16 Fighting Falcon and A-10 Thunderbolt/Warhog designs.

#### CORRUPT SOLE-SOURCING ACQUISITIONS

On Tuesday, acting Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Darlene Costello told the US House Armed Services subcommittee on tactical air and land forces that 41 F-35s currently do not even have an engine due to maintenance issues, while 56 F135 power modules are being repaired.

Costello said there are 272 F-35A aircraft currently in the US Air Force inventory, meaning nearly 15 percent are without an engine. F-35 program executive officer Lt. Gen. Eric Fink confirmed Costello's numbers.

Former US Air Force officer and veteran Defense Department analyst Chuck Spinney, a leading figure in the US military procurement reform movement, said that the ongoing F-35 fiasco was the culmination of Department of Defense procurement procedures going back generations.

"I can say this disaster is a case study in what is wrong with the Pentagon's corrupt acquisition practices. The promises of acquisition reform did not materialize, and the F-35 sank into the familiar swamp of cost growth and schedule slippage that usually precede a performance shortfall," he said.

Independent Institute Center on Peace and Liberty Director Ivan Eland agreed that the F-35 program exhibited, to an extreme degree, procurement pathologies that remained endemic in the US military-industrial complex.

"The basic problems afflicting most weapons programs are the same: a lack of competition in the oligopolistic defense industry with a sole buyer that is the government," he said.

Defense subcontracts are not given out as they are in the commercial sector by competition on value for the money, but are based on geography and politics, Eland explained.

"Government over-specification of requirements and excessive regulation limits competition, thereby resulting in soaring costs producing fewer economies of scale, schedule slippage, and compromised performance.... The F-35 suffers from all these maladies of the defense industry," he said.

#### ON THE ROAD TO IRRELEVANCE

These old deep-rooted, expensive, slow and inefficient ways of providing weapons systems to the US armed forces are particularly obsolete and dangerous because of the 21st century's ongoing revolution in military technology, historian and political commentator Dan Lazare warned.

"New technologies are transforming warfare in a way that threatens to render obscenely expensive hi-tech toys like the F-35 irrelevant and obsolete," he said.

Jet fighters have gotten swifter, more complex, and more computerized over the years, Lazare acknowledged.

"But while aircraft like the F-16 and A-10 Thunderbolt, aka the Warthog, are still cost-effective in terms of combat, the F-35 has taken the tendency toward greater and greater complexity to absurd extremes," he said.

The F-35's software is filled with glitches and is vulnerable to hacking, so they lose out to F-15 jets in mock combat, Lazare pointed out.

"And while they are designed to perform a multitude of tasks such as bombing, spying and providing ground support, their performance in each is inferior to older and cheaper specialized aircraft," he said.

The obsolescent nature of the F-35 jet was part of a much broader process, Lazare observed.

"This is not new. The battleship has gone the way of the dodo, the tank is following suit thanks to low-cost drones equipped with armor-penetrating missiles, while aircraft carriers are increasingly vulnerable to hypersonic missiles," he said.

All these developments were examples of technological concepts that thrived for decades, but eventually fell victim to the law of diminishing returns, Lazare said.

"The F-35 shows that jet fighters may be following a similar flight pattern," he added.

In another report earlier this month, the GAO estimated sustainment costs over the F-35's projected 66-year life cycle have risen steadily since 2012 from \$1.11 trillion to \$1.27 trillion despite efforts to trim expenses.

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**RPT - US Military Trained Individuals Suspected in Assassination of Haitian President - Pentagon**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - The US military has trained some of the former Colombian servicemen who are suspected of assassinating Haiti's President Jovenel Moise last week, Defense Department spokesperson Ken Hoffman told Sputnik.

"A review of our training databases indicates that a small number of the Colombian individuals detained as part of this investigation had participated in past US military training and education programs, while serving as active members of the Colombian Military Forces," Hoffman said in a statement to Sputnik. "Our review is ongoing, so we do not have additional details at this time." Hoffman noted that the United States routinely conducts training for the militaries of partner nations in South America, Central America and the Caribbean, he added.

On July 7, a group of assassins shot dead Moise at his residence and wounded his wife. Most of the members of the group are Colombian citizens. The Haitian authorities also arrested two US citizens, as well as identified five companies they consider associated with the case. Christian Emmanuel Sanon, a 63-year-old US-based doctor and pastor, has been arrested on suspicion of plotting murdering Moise.

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The F-35 program, originally approved by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his team in October 2001 under President George W. Bush, is projected to be the most expensive aircraft and military program in history, totaling at least \$1.5 trillion.

The aircraft continues to underperform in most key areas and be outfought by more than 40-year-old F-15 Eagle designs in combat tests, according to the analysts.

The aircraft's main defense contractor Lockheed Martin still has not resolved 864 software and hardware defects since the development phase finally ended years behind schedule in April 2018, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report on Tuesday.

In recent months, Lockheed Martin managed to rectify only eight of 872 defects that were pending in March, GAO Director Jon Ludwigson said in the report. The F-35 still cannot even be properly tested for operational use because its simulator system remains inadequate and has not yet been upgraded, the report said.

The aircraft are now admitted to cost at least \$100 million per plane, making them too expensive to even use in air superiority dog fighting or low flying ground support. In both roles, they remain inferior to the planes they were supposed to replace - the old F-16 Fighting Falcon and A-10 Thunderbolt/Warhog designs.

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#### CORRUPT SOLE-SOURCING ACQUISITIONS

On Tuesday, acting Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Darlene Costello told the US House Armed Services subcommittee on tactical air and land forces that 41 F-35s currently do not even have an engine due to maintenance issues, while 56 F135 power modules are being repaired.

Costello said there are 272 F-35A aircraft currently in the US Air Force inventory, meaning nearly 15 percent are without an engine. F-35 program executive officer Lt. Gen. Eric Fink confirmed Costello's numbers.

Former US Air Force officer and veteran Defense Department analyst Chuck Spinney, a leading figure in the US military procurement reform movement, said that the ongoing F-35 fiasco was the culmination of Department of Defense procurement procedures going back generations.

"I can say this disaster is a case study in what is wrong with the Pentagon's corrupt acquisition practices. The promises of acquisition reform did not materialize, and the F-35 sank into the familiar swamp of cost growth and schedule slippage that usually precede a performance shortfall," he said.

Independent Institute Center on Peace and Liberty Director Ivan Eland agreed that the F-35 program exhibited, to an extreme degree, procurement pathologies that remained endemic in the US military-industrial complex.

"The basic problems afflicting most weapons programs are the same: a lack of competition in the oligopolistic defense industry with a sole buyer that is the government," he said.

Defense subcontracts are not given out as they are in the commercial sector by competition on value for the money, but are based on geography and politics, Eland explained.

"Government over-specification of requirements and excessive regulation limits competition, thereby resulting in soaring costs producing fewer economies of scale, schedule slippage, and compromised performance.... The F-35 suffers from all these maladies of the defense industry," he said.

#### ON THE ROAD TO IRRELEVANCE

These old deep-rooted, expensive, slow and inefficient ways of providing weapons systems to the US armed forces are particularly obsolete and dangerous because of the 21st century's ongoing revolution in military technology, historian and political commentator Dan Lazare warned.

"New technologies are transforming warfare in a way that threatens to render obscenely expensive hi-tech toys like the F-35 irrelevant and obsolete," he said.

Jet fighters have gotten swifter, more complex, and more computerized over the years, Lazare acknowledged.

"But while aircraft like the F-16 and A-10 Thunderbolt, aka the Warthog, are still cost-effective in terms of combat, the F-35 has taken the tendency toward greater and greater complexity to absurd extremes," he said.

The F-35's software is filled with glitches and is vulnerable to hacking, so they lose out to F-15 jets in mock combat, Lazare pointed out.

"And while they are designed to perform a multitude of tasks such as bombing, spying and providing ground support, their performance in each is inferior to older and cheaper specialized aircraft," he said.

The obsolescent nature of the F-35 jet was part of a much broader process, Lazare observed.

"This is not new. The battleship has gone the way of the dodo, the tank is following suit thanks to low-cost drones equipped with armor-penetrating missiles, while aircraft carriers are increasingly vulnerable to hypersonic missiles," he said.

All these developments were examples of technological concepts that thrived for decades, but eventually fell victim to the law of diminishing returns, Lazare said.

"The F-35 shows that jet fighters may be following a similar flight pattern," he added.

In another report earlier this month, the GAO estimated sustainment costs over the F-35's projected 66-year life cycle have risen steadily since 2012 from \$1.11 trillion to \$1.27 trillion despite efforts to trim expenses.

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**Blinken Calls Hariri's Resignation 'Another Disappointing Development' for Lebanon**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is disappointed over the resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister designate Saad Hariri amid the ongoing economic and political crisis, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a press release.

On Thursday, Hariri announced his resignation after his meeting with President Michel Aoun who denied once again his proposed composition of the cabinet.

"Today's announcement that Saad Hariri is resigning as Prime Minister-designate is yet another disappointing development for the Lebanese people," Blinken said on Thursday.

Blinken urged political leaders in Lebanon to put aside differences to form a new government and hold parliamentary elections in 2022.

Lebanon has been suffering from a deep economic crisis since 2019. The national currency has lost over 80% of its value, while the population is facing shortage of fuel and other essentials. The economic collapse is being accompanied by the political crisis, as the country has had no stable government since January 2020, when Hariri, who was the prime minister since 2016, left his post. He was appointed as the prime minister-designate again in October 2020, following the resignation of Hassan Diab, who quit over the Beirut port blast, and Mustapha Adib's refusal to form a government. Hariri claimed that he would manage to find a compromise between all blocs and parties, but failed.

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#### REVIEW - Biden, Merkel Discuss Nord Stream 2 Possibilities in Europe, Climate Change

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and German Chancellor Angela Merkel during bilateral meetings at the White House discussed the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project along with other issues including climate change.

The Biden Administration has consistently stated its objection to the project, citing concerns over European and Ukrainian security, particularly energy security. However, the project continues to go forward, with construction upwards of 90% complete. Russian officials have repeatedly said the project is purely a commercial endeavor.

"We talked about Russia and Ukraine and in this context also about Nord Stream 2. We've come to different assessments as to what this project entails," Merkel said during a press conference that followed a bilateral meeting between the two leaders on Thursday, with Biden adding shortly thereafter that "good friends can disagree" on such matters.

Both sides, though, are preparing contingencies should agreements with Russia that ensure Ukrainian security post-construction fall through. Biden said that both the US and Germany have assigned teams to explore practical measures that could be taken and whether the project strengthens or weakens the region based on Russian actions.

Merkel added that the European community has "a number of instruments" such as sanctions at their disposal should it come to that, although she noted that she hopes no such decision has to be made. She and Biden agreed that in any scenario, Russia must not be allowed to use energy as a weapon with which to threaten and coerce neighboring countries.

The two heads of state also launched the US-Germany Climate and Energy Partnership, which aims to strengthen cooperation between the nations on addressing the threat of climate change and achieving a global net-zero future.

Additionally, they discussed the ongoing situations in Cuba and Haiti.

The meeting took place amid heavy flooding across Germany that has left approximately 1,300 people missing and at least 58 dead. Biden began the joint press conference by offering his condolences to the German people on behalf of the US.

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#### California's Los Angeles County Reimposes Indoor Mask Mandate - Health Agency

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - Los Angeles County's health department said it has reimposed an indoor mask mandate regardless of individuals' vaccination status.

"New Health Officer Order will require masking indoors regardless of vaccination status," the health agency said in an advisory on Thursday.

The advisory said the mask mandate will go into effect on Sunday.

Los Angeles County health officials are concerned about another surge of COVID-19 cases after seven straight days of single-day infections topping one thousand. On Thursday, Los Angeles County reported 1,537 new infections, which is the highest single-day count since early March.

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#### US Will Not Ease Ban on Remittances to Cuba Amid Unrest Over Economic Crisis - Biden

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said his administration will not ease restrictions on remittances sent from US residents to relatives in Cuba because the Cuban government will likely confiscate the money.

On Sunday, thousands of Cubans took part in the biggest anti-government protest in Cuba in recent years to express dissatisfaction with what they believe to be a lack of freedom and a degrading economic situation in the country. Some protesters demanded that free elections be held.

"There are a number of things that we would consider doing to help the people of Cuba but it would require a different circumstance or guarantee that they would not be taken advantage of by the government," Biden said on Thursday. "For example, the ability to send remittances back to Cuba. I would not do that now because the fact is it is highly likely the regime would confiscate those remittances or big chunks of it."

US media reported on Wednesday that the Biden administration planned to ease the ban on remittances to Cuba.

In 2019, the Trump administration imposed restrictions on remittances sent from the United States to Cuba in order to deny the Cuban government access to hard currency.

US restrictions on trade with Cuba date back to the island nation's communist revolution in the late 1950s and involve at least a half dozen different US laws. President Barack Obama took

steps to normalize bilateral relations with the island, but many of those steps were reversed by the Trump administration.

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Senate Panel to Hold Hearing on FBI's Errors in Ex-US Olympic Gymnastics Team Doctor Probe

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - The US Senate Judiciary Committee will hold a hearing soon on the issue of the FBI mishandling its investigation into former US Olympic gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar, Chairman Dick Durbin said during a meeting with his colleagues. On Wednesday, the Justice Department Office of Inspector General (OIG) said the FBI Indianapolis field office's investigation into allegations of sexual abuse by Nassar was marred by multiple failures.

"We will be holding a hearing on this issue related to the administration of the Federal Bureau of Investigation," Durbin said on Thursday.

Nassar was arrested following a Michigan State University Police and FBI Lansing resident office investigation that led to the discovery of 30,000 child pornography materials on his electronic devices. In total, more than 260 women and girls have claimed that they were sexually assaulted by Nassar.

In January 2018, Nassar was sentenced to 175 years in prison for sexually abusing minors - the young female athletes who were entrusted to his care as a doctor.

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US, German Teams Looking at Possible Measures on Nord Stream 2 Pipeline - Biden

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - US and German teams have been tasked with exploring potential, practical measures that could be taken on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project and the impact it may have on Ukraine, President Joe Biden said on Thursday.

"The Chancellor and I have asked our teams to look at practical measures we can take together, and whether or not Europe's energy security, Ukraine's security are actually strengthened or weakened based on Russian actions," Biden said during a press conference on Thursday after meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

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Half of Canadians Say Trudeau Has Handled Coronavirus Pandemic Well - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - Half of Canadians say they believe Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has handled the coronavirus pandemic well, an Angus Reid poll revealed.

"Half of Canadians (50 percent) now say Prime Minister Trudeau has done a good job of handling the pandemic. This is the highest mark since January. Forty-six per cent say he has done a poor job," the study, unveiled on Thursday, said.

The findings showed that opinions of the Prime Minister's handling of the pandemic were split by gender, with the majority of men - of all ages - disapproving of Trudeau's work, while the majority of women were satisfied with the response.

Respondents were also split along geographical and ideological lines, with the Trudeau government's response being met with disapproval in the conservative-leaning prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Respondents from traditionally left-leaning bastions such as Atlantic Canada and British Columbia were most likely to approve of Trudeau's work. According to the Prime Minister and top health officials, over half of Canadians eligible to get vaccinated against the coronavirus are fully immunized, while nearly 80 percent have received at least one vaccine dose.

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US, German Teams Asked to Look Into Practical Measures to Take on Nord Stream 2 - Biden

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - The United States and Germany will convene a bilateral working group to review practical measures the two countries could take on Nord Stream 2 if it threatens Europe's energy security, US President Joe Biden said during a press conference after meeting with Chancellor Angela Merkel.

"The Chancellor and I have asked our teams to look at practical measures we could take together and whether or not Europe energy security, Ukraine security are actually strengthened or weakened based on Russian actions," Biden said on Thursday.

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Merkel Says EU Has Tools if Russia Breaks Obligations on Gas Transit Via Ukraine

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - German Chancellor Angela Merkel said the European Union has tools available to use in case Russia violates its obligations on gas transit through Ukraine.

"We have a number of instruments at our disposal, which are not necessarily on the German side, but on the European side," Merkel said in a joint press conference with US President Joe Biden after a bilateral meeting on Thursday. "For example, sanctions... we have possibilities to react, we are in contact with our European friends on this, but... I hope we will never have to take those decisions. You will then see what we do."

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**US Considering How to Restore Internet Access in Cuba - Biden**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is considering whether it has the technological means to restore internet access for the Cuban people, US President Joe Biden said.

"We are considering whether we have the technological ability to reinstate that access," Biden said during a press conference on Thursday.

The Cuban authorities cut internet access in an attempt to crack down on protests in the country.

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**US Ready to Give Vaccines to Cuba if Assured They Will Reach Population - Biden**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to provide Cuba with a significant number of coronavirus vaccine doses if given assurances that international organizations will administer them to the general population, US President Joe Biden said.

"I'd be prepared to give significant amounts of vaccine if in fact I was assured an international organization would administer those vaccines and do it in a way that average citizens would have access to those vaccines," Biden said during a press conference on Thursday.

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**Biden Says Communism 'Universally Failed System,' Socialism Not Useful Substitute**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden during a press conference that communism is a failed system and socialism is not a useful substitute.

"Communism is a failed system, a universally failed system, and I don't see socialism as a very useful substitute," Biden said on Thursday.

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**Sending US Troops to Haiti Not on Agenda - Biden**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden ruled out sending US troops to Haiti except for a small contingent of Marines ensure the US embassy staff in the country is secure. "The idea of sending in American forces into Haiti is not on the agenda at this moment," Biden told reporters. "We were only sending American Marines to our embassy to make sure that they are secure, and nothing is out of whack at all," he added.

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Merkel Says US, Germany Have Come to Different Assessments of Nord Stream 2 Project

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - The United States and Germany have made different assessments of the Russian Nord Stream 2 pipeline project and what it entails, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said.

"We talked about Russia and Ukraine and in this context also about Nord Stream 2. We've come to different assessments as to what this project entails," Merkel said during a press conference on Thursday after meeting with US President Joe Biden at the White House.

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Biden Says US, Germany Will Continue to Defend NATO's Eastern Flank Against Russia

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he and German Chancellor Angela Merkel reaffirmed during their meeting at the White House that their countries would stand together to defend NATO's eastern flank against Russia.

"We stand together and will continue to stand together to defend our eastern flank [of] allies at NATO against Russian aggression," Biden said during a joint press conference on Thursday. Biden added that he and Merkel also reaffirmed the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.

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US, Germany Agree Russia Must Not Be Allowed to Use Energy as Weapon - Biden

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said that he reiterated his concerns about the Nord Stream 2 pipeline to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and found that they both are united in their resolve not to let Russia use energy as a weapon.

"While I reiterated my concerns about Nord Stream 2 Chancellor Merkel and I are absolutely united in our conviction that Russia must not be allowed to use energy as a weapon to coerce or

threaten its neighbors," Biden said during a joint press conference after meeting Merkel at the White House.

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#### **Lockheed Martin Opens Factory to Build Orion Spacecraft for NASA's Moon, Mars Missions**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - Production of the Orion spacecraft for future US missions to the Moon and Mars will take place at a former NASA visitor center converted into a spacecraft factory with a \$20 million renovation, Lockheed Martin said.

"Lockheed Martin opened its Spacecraft Test, Assembly and Resource (STAR) Center today. The STAR Center features business and digital transformation innovations that will expand manufacturing, assembly and testing capacity for NASA's Orion spacecraft program and ultimately, future space exploration," a company press release said on Thursday.

Lockheed Martin acquired the building that formerly housed the Astronaut Training Experience tourist attraction in the US state of Florida and spent 18 months and nearly \$20 million converting the facility into what the release called a spacecraft factory of the future.

Orion spacecraft for the Artemis I and II Moon missions is currently being built at the nearby Neil Armstrong Operations and Checkout (O&C) building at NASA's Kennedy Space Center, the release said.

The addition of the STAR Center provides much-needed space for a new production phase for Orion - starting with the Artemis III mission - to be built faster, the release also said.

The third Artemis mission is slated to land two astronauts - a man and woman - on the lunar South Pole in 2024, the release added.

NASA has committed to purchase Orion vehicles for six missions with the potential to add another six through 2030, according to the release.

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#### **SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) -

#### **BIDEN-MERKEL MEETING**

\* US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he hopes the US-Germany friendship to continue after German Chancellor Angela Merkel leaves office.

\* Biden said at a meeting with Merkel in Washington that he hopes to visit Germany "soon."

#### **PROTESTS IN CUBA**

\* The United States is looking closely at how it can help support the voices of the Cuban people, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Thursday in a comment on the recent protests in Cuba.

\* Russia calls on the United States to not interfere in Cuba's internal affairs and let the Cuban people make their own decisions, Russian Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

#### US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

\* White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters on Thursday that she believes US and Russian experts held a meeting "yesterday" to discuss cybersecurity threats but offered to check her claim to ensure it is correct.

\* US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry said that he intended to meet again with his Russian counterpart, Ruslan Edelgeriev, before the conference in Glasgow, which was scheduled for this fall.

\* Russia and the United States have areas for cooperation that could help partially ease tensions, Kerry said.

\* The United States will thoroughly study the ideas of Russian President Vladimir Putin on the climate agenda, these proposals are very positive, Kerry said.

\* The United States and Russia could conduct joint research and exchange technologies, including in hydrogen, to reduce carbon emissions, Kerry said.

\* The United States and Russia acknowledge the need to address the increasing challenge rising from climate change with urgency, a joint statement from Kerry and Edelgeriyev said

#### FLOODS IN GERMANY

\* The death toll from floods caused by heavy rains in the federal states of Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia in western Germany increased to 42, the Bild reported on Thursday.

\* Russian President Vladimir Putin sent condolences to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in connection with the tragic consequences of a cyclone that struck western Germany, a corresponding telegram was published by the Kremlin.

#### INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND

\* The International Monetary Fund (IMF) wants to see more progress in Ukraine in order to provide the country a new tranche, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

\* The IMF is engaging with Haitian authorities to help maintain stability in the country in the wake of President Jovenel Moise's assassination, Rice said.

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Canada's Former Top Military Commander Charged in Military Sex Scandal - Defense Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - Canada's former Chief of Defense Staff Gen. Jonathan Vance has been charged with obstruction of justice in the ongoing military sex scandal, the Department of National Defense announced on Thursday.

The public became aware of allegations against Vance, who is accused of misconduct by two female subordinates, including during his time as the country's commanding officer, in February setting off a political firestorm that has plagued the Canadian military and the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for months.

"On July 15th, 2021, the Canadian Forces National Investigation Service (CFNIS) charged Retired General Jonathan Vance with the following: One (1) count of Obstruct Justice, contrary to Section 139 of the Criminal Code," the Department of National Defense said in a press release.

The offense was committed after the CFNIS began its investigation into the allegations on February 4, the news release said.

The Canadian military sex scandal has taken several turns since February, with Vance's replacement, Adm. Art McDonald, being forced to step down amid similar allegations weeks after his appointment the government's vaccine distribution czar, Maj. Gen. Dany Fortin resigning from his role in May.

The reignited was reignited last month it was revealed that Vice Chief of the Defense Mike Rouleau, who holds oversight authority over the CFNIS, partook in a game of golf with Vance. The affair has also inflicted a political toll, with the House of Commons Defense officially censuring National Defense Minister Harjit Sajjan over the scandal, while citing previous examples of mismanagement at the DND under his watch, including the failed fighter jet replacement program.

Speaking to reporters earlier in the day, Trudeau refused to comment on the development, citing the ongoing criminal case.

Sputnik has reached out to the office of the Minister of National Defense and the DND for comment.

The political firestorm forced the government to embark on the second independent review of sexual misconduct in the Canadian military in five years.

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**US Has Plans For More Presence in Florida Straits to Manage Migration From Cuba - Reports**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) – The US has contingency plans and is considering a more robust presence in Florida Straits to prevent possible mass migration from Cuba in the aftermath of the recent protests and difficult post-pandemic situation, Reuters reported citing an unnamed senior US administration official.

The report cites US Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas warning Cubans not to venture to cross the US border and saying that a senior Cuban official's threat of mass migration to the US is nothing more but a reflection of "a lack of care for the lives of Cubans who would risk their lives to come to the United States."

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**UN Chief Urges All Parties to Conflict to Observe Truce During Olympic, Paralympic Games**

UNITED NATIONS, July 15 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Thursday called on all parties to conflict around the world to cease military activities during the Olympic and Paralympic Games set to kick off July 23.

"In a few days, athletes from around the world will come together in Japan for the Olympic and Paralympic Games," Guterres said in a video message. "I call on all parties to conflict to observe the Olympic Truce during the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, and to build on it in the weeks and months ahead."

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**US Expands Reach of MQ-9 Drone With Remote Takeoff, Landing Capability - Air Force**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) – Successful tests of a remote takeoff and landing system for the MQ-9 Reaper drone promise to expand the weapon's capabilities by allowing the operators to divert the aircraft to airfields lacking traditional crews and infrastructure, the US Air Force said on Thursday.

"This capability is a key enabler for MQ-9 Agile Combat Employment and, combined with the MQ-9's next software upgrade and receipt of the portable aircraft control station, will change how it will be employed in theaters worldwide," an Air Force press release said.

A successful two-day test of the drone's Automatic Takeoff and Landing Capability allowed operators to fly the aircraft between bases in the Western United States without the need for specialized launch and recovery crews, the release added.

As a result, the MQ-9 can be used in foreign airfields where the drone has never flown before, according to the release.

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**US B-52 Bombers Deployed to Indo-Pacific Region - Strategic Command**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) – A group of US Air Force B-52 bombers have been deployed to the Indo-Pacific region to demonstrate commitment to American allies in the region, Strategic Command said on Thursday.

"A group of U.S. Air Force B-52 Stratofortresses, Airmen and support equipment from Minot Air Force Base, N.D., deployed to the Indo-Pacific region in support of Pacific Air Forces' Bomber Task Force," the Strategic Command said in a release. "The BTF [Bomber Task Force] demonstrates continued U.S. commitment to allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region." The group of bombers will be stationed at the Andersen Air Force Base in Guam, according to the release.

The bombers will also participate in training exercises with Australian Defense Force during Talisman Saber 2021 that is expected to strengthen the collective ability to support a free and open Indo-Pacific, the release said.

US is increasingly concerned with China's growing military power in the Indo-Pacific region and strives to scale up its presence there. In June, it was reported that Pentagon was mulling a deployment of a permanent naval task force in the Pacific.

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**EU Subjects Migrants to Harrowing Abuses When Forcibly Returned to Libya – Rights Group**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) – New evidence of abuses against migrants intercepted crossing the Mediterranean and forcibly returned to Libyan detention centers highlights horrifying consequences of European cooperation with Libya on migration and border control, Amnesty International said in a report on Thursday.

"Decade-long violations against refugees and migrants continued unabated in Libyan detention centers during the first six months of 2021 despite repeated promises to address them," a press release summarizing the report said.

For example, survivors from one center recently rebranded by Libya's Interior Ministry said guards raped women and subjected them to sexual violence including by coercing them into sex in exchange for food or their freedom.

"The report also highlights the ongoing complicity of European states that have shamefully continued to enable and assist Libyan coastguards in capturing people at sea and forcibly returning them to the hellscape of detention in Libya, despite knowing full well the horrors they will endure," Amnesty Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa Diana Eltahawy said in the release.

The report urged European states to suspend cooperation on migration and border control with Libya.

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**US Legislation Earmarks \$21Bln to Modernize US Hydroelectric Dams - Senator Wyden**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) – Democratic US Senator from Oregon, Ron Wyden, announced on Thursday legislation aimed at upgrading existing some hydroelectric dams and removing defunct ones, which would subsequently restore river systems.

"[The bill] would invest \$21.1 billion to enhance the safety, grid resilience benefits and power generating capacity of America's dams and provide historic funding to remove dams that are no longer necessary," Wyden said in a press release.

Many dams that generate hydropower are aging and need upgrades to continue providing an essential baseload source of renewable energy. Hydropower is responsible for 6 percent of US electricity production and more than 90 percent of US electricity storage capacity, the release said.

The legislation would also target many of the nation's 90,000 dams, including about 6,000 so-called high-hazard dams that have poor, unsatisfactory or unknown safety ratings that without rehabilitation would pose a threat to human life if they fail, the release added.

In addition, dams that have outlived their useful life would be removed to help restore rivers to their natural state, according to the release.

The legislation, titled "The Twenty-First Century Dams Act," is cosponsored by Senators Dianne Feinstein, Alex Padilla, Debbie Stabenow, Gary Peters, Kirsten Gillibrand and Michael Bennet, all Democrats.

A bipartisan version was introduced earlier in the House by Representatives Don Young, a Republican, and Annie Kuster, a Democrat.

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**Biden Says Hopes to Ensure US-Germany Friendship Continues After Merkel Leaves Office**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) -US President Joe Biden said on Thursday he hopes the US-Germany friendship will continue after German Chancellor Angela Merkel leaves office.

"One of the things that I want to talk about is the enduring friendship the Chancellor has been so responsible for nailing down and making sure it continues," Biden said during a meeting with Merkel in the Oval office.

Merkel, who turns 67 on July 17, retires after Germany's election on September 26 as she chose not to seek her fifth term in office. Merkel is paying her 19th official visit to the United States with Biden being the fourth President she will be meeting with over the span of her chancellorship. She is also the first European leader to be hosted at the White House since Biden's inauguration, though they both met during last month's G-7 summit in England and NATO summit in Brussels.

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**Biden During Meeting With Merkel Says Hopes to Visit Germany 'Soon'**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday at a meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Washington that he hopes to visit Germany "soon."  
"Soon, I hope," the US leader said when asked when he might visit Germany.

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Merkel Arrives at White House for Talks With Biden - Pool Report

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - German Chancellor Angela Merkel arrived at the White House on Thursday afternoon to attend a bilateral meeting with US President Joe Biden to discuss a range of global security matters.

The two leaders are expected to discuss matters concerning Russia, Nord Stream 2, China, Ukraine, Afghanistan, cybersecurity, Libya, the Sahel, among other topics.

Merkel, who turns 67 on July 17, retires after Germany's election on September 26 as she chose not to seek her fifth term in office. Merkel is paying her 19th official visit to the United States with Biden being the fourth President she will be meeting with over the span of her chancellorship. She is also the first European leader to be hosted at the White House since Biden's inauguration, though they both met during last month's G-7 summit in England and NATO summit in Brussels.

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Microsoft Says Disrupted Use of Cyberweapons Made and Sold by Israeli Group

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - Microsoft has disrupted the use of cyberweapons that they claim to have been produced by an Israeli group and sold to other cybercriminal actors, the company said on Thursday.

"We take this [cyber] threat seriously and have disrupted the use of certain cyberweapons manufactured and sold by a group we call Sourgum. The weapons disabled were being used in precision attacks targeting more than 100 victims around the world including politicians, human rights activists, journalists, academics, embassy workers and political dissidents... We believe Sourgum is an Israel-based private sector offensive actor or PSOA," Microsoft said in an official blog post.

Microsoft was made aware of the group's malware by a tip from Citizen Lab, a team that studies information and internet-related topics in the context of human rights. They identified the group as a company called Candiru. Following the tip, Microsoft's Threat Intelligence and Security Response centers began studying the malware and developing ways to combat it.

Software updates that will prevent Sourgum's malware from working on the computers of Windows users were issued this week. Microsoft also shared the protections against the

malware, dubbed DevilsTongue, with others in the security community in order to protect their customers as well.

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#### Misinformation About US Vaccines Mostly Spread By Individuals - Surgeon General

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - Most misinformation about the US coronavirus vaccines is spread by individuals while some is spread by nation states, Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy said on Thursday.

"The misinformation that we're seeing comes from multiple sources. Yes, there is disinformation that is coming from bad actors, but what is also important to point out is much of the misinformation that is circulating online is often coming from individuals," Murthy said.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in later remarks that there are about 12 people responsible for creating 65 percent of vaccine disinformation and they're all still active on Facebook.

Psaki emphasized that Facebook must quickly take action against harmful posts.

Moreover, Psaki said Facebook should provide public and transparent data on the impact of COVID-19 misinformation.

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#### US Says Will Send More COVID-19 Vaccines to Haiti Soon After First 500,000 Doses Delivered

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - The United States has already sent 500,000 doses of the Moderna coronavirus vaccine to Haiti via the COVAX mechanism, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Thursday, adding that Washington plans to supply more doses soon.

"Last night, Haiti received 500,000 doses of COVID-19 Moderna vaccines donated by the United States through the COVAX facility and we will send a significant amount of [vaccine] doses to Haiti soon," she said during a press briefing

The move is part of the Biden administration's commitment to share 80 million doses of the coronavirus vaccines with countries around the world.

The US government is allocating the vaccine doses on the basis of availability and whether the countries are ready to receive and administer them.

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#### US Military Trained Individuals Suspected in Assassination of Haitian President - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - The US military has trained some of the former Colombian servicemen who are suspected of assassinating Haiti's President Jovenel Moise last week, Defense Department spokesperson Ken Hoffman told Sputnik on Thursday.

"A review of our training databases indicates that a small number of the Colombian individuals detained as part of this investigation had participated in past US military training and education programs, while serving as active members of the Colombian Military Forces," Hoffman said in a statement to Sputnik. "Our review is ongoing, so we do not have additional details at this time." Hoffman noted that the United States routinely conducts training for the militaries of partner nations in South America, Central America and the Caribbean, he added.

On July 7, a group of assassins shot dead Moise at his residence and wounded his wife. Most of the members of the group are Colombian citizens. The Haitian authorities also arrested two US citizens, as well as identified five companies they consider associated with the case.

Christian Emmanuel Sanon, a 63-year-old US-based doctor and pastor, has been arrested on suspicion of plotting murdering Moise.

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**Canada's Trudeau Says 'Deeply Concerned' By Crackdown on Protests in Cuba**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday that Ottawa is concerned by the crackdown on protesters in Cuba.

Cuba has witnessed this week the largest protests in the island nation since 1994, fueled by anger over shortages of basic goods. According to reports, more than 100 demonstrators have been arrested and one individual has died.

"We are deeply concerned by the violent crackdown on protests by the Cuban regime. We condemn the arrests and repression by the authorities of peaceful demonstrators," Trudeau said during a press briefing.

The Prime Minister added that Cubans have the right demonstrate and that Canada stands with the Cuban people in their desire for "democracy, freedom and respect."

According to media, protests and gatherings took place in eight Cuban cities, including Havana, with thousands of people attending pro- and anti-government demonstrations.

The opposition is demanding free elections and the resolution of social issues, while supporters of the Cuban government are rallying against the US blockade of the island nation and insist that the sanctions are to blame for the crisis.

US restrictions on trade with Cuba date back to the island nation's communist revolution in the late 1950s and involve at least a half dozen different US laws. President Barack Obama took steps to normalize bilateral relations with the island, but many of those steps were reversed by the former administration of Donald Trump. Over the four years, the Trump administration added 243 new economic sanctions to toughen the embargo on Cuba.

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**Facebook Says Removed Scores of Accounts Linked to Iranian Cyber Espionage Campaigns**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - Facebook has taken down a number of accounts linked to an Iranian group conducting cyber espionage campaigns on the social media site, the company said on Thursday.

"Today, we're sharing actions we took against a group of hackers in Iran to disrupt their ability to use their infrastructure to abuse our platform, distribute malware and conduct espionage operations across the internet, targeting primarily the United States," Facebook said in a press release.

The group, known as Tortoiseshell, was previously reported to mainly focus on the IT industry in the Middle East, but Facebook claims to have found them targeting personnel and companies in the defense and aerospace industries in the United States and to a lesser extent in the United Kingdom and continental Europe.

Facebook said that the group engaged in a larger, cross-platform campaign that involved creating fake online accounts that were then used to contact targets, build trust and get them to click on malicious links that enabled spying.

Facebook explained that the fake websites to which the victims were redirected were used to steal their login credentials for corporate and personal email, collaboration tools and social media. They were also able to obtain information about people's devices, software and networks they connected to in order to deliver malware, including keystroke loggers, Facebook said.

Much of the malware used in the campaign was developed by a Tehran-based IT company with ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and some of the company's current and former executives have ties to companies currently under US sanctions, it added.

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**US Looking Closely at How to Help Cuba 'In a Humanitarian Way' - White House**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is looking closely at how it can help support the voices of the Cuban people, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Thursday in a comment on the recent protests in Cuba.

"We are looking closely at how we can help [Cuba] in a humanitarian way, how we can support the voices of the Cuban people, and there is an ongoing policy review in this regard," Psaki said.

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#### Psaki Says She Believes US, Russian Experts Met Yesterday on Cybersecurity

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters on Thursday that she believes US and Russian experts held a meeting "yesterday" to discuss cybersecurity threats but offered to check her claim to ensure it is correct.

"I would say that the meeting, which I believe was yesterday - I will double confirm for you... as part of ongoing engagement, that has been occurring at the expert level since the President [Joe Biden] met with President [Vladimir] Putin," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Psaki said the meeting had been ongoing and no one meeting is necessarily decisive.

"It is about having a continued discussion about our expectations and steps that need to be taken to address ransomware attacks, cyber attacks," she said.

US officials earlier mentioned July 16 as a possible date for consultations that were expected to focus on ransomware attacks.

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#### Data Feed From F-35 Jet Enables Intercept of Cruise Missile in Army Test - Lockheed Martin

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - The US Army deployed an F-35 jet as an elevated sensor platform linked to missile defenses in a test featuring the successful intercept of a cruise missile with a PAC-3 interceptor, Northrop Grumman said on Thursday.

"The mid-July US Army flight test marks a first in one flight test – F-35 data contributing to the global track used by the US Army Integrated Air and Missile Defense Battle Command System (IBCS) to live fire a PAC-3, Northrop Grumman said in a press release.

IBCS, developed by Northrop Grumman, used the F-35 data with other contributing sensor data to initiate the launch of the PAC-3 to neutralize the incoming threat, using Hit-to-Kill technology unique to PAC-3 interceptor, the release said.

The test in which a surrogate cruise missile was successfully intercepted took place at the White Sands Missile Range in the US state of New Mexico, the release added.

The IBCS is the centerpiece of the US Army's modernization strategy for air and missile defenses. The system is designed to network with multiple sensor platforms, according to Northrop Grumman.

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#### UN Sees 'Very Intensive' Afghan Refugees' Movement to Border Areas - Resident Coordinator

UNITED NATIONS, July 15 (Sputnik) - UN Deputy Special Representative Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Afghanistan Ramiz Alakbarov said on Thursday his office is witnessing intensive movement of internally displaced Afghans towards the country's borders.

"We are also seeing very intensive movements of the population to the areas, adjusting to the orders, where Iranian and Pakistan borders are now largely closed, and the people are using the illegal border crossing trying to move through those borders," Alakbarov said.

Alakbarov said the drought, the increased military activities and the gradual takeover by the Taliban opposition movement (banned in Russia) of Afghanistan's territory have contributed to these displacements.

He also noted that the United Nations is reporting deportations and removal mostly from Iran of Afghan nationals returning to the country.

Within Afghanistan, some 270,000 have already been internally displaced, leaving rural areas to seek shelter in urban and regional centers, Alakbarov said.

The total number of uprooted people in Afghanistan had reached 3.5 million this year. Pakistan hosts about three million Afghan nationals and had warned its limit to take in new refugees is exhausted.

The United Nations' humanitarian appeal seeking to also address the operation for Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran is severely underfunded, at only 43 percent of a total of \$337 million requested for 2021.

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"Today, we're sharing actions we took against a group of hackers in Iran to disrupt their ability to use their infrastructure to abuse our platform, distribute malware and conduct espionage operations across the internet, targeting primarily the United States," Facebook said in a press release.

This group, known as Tortoiseshell, was previously reported to mainly focus on the IT industry in the Middle East, but Facebook claims to have found them targeting personnel and companies in the defense and aerospace industries in the US, and to a lesser extent in the UK and Europe.

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#### Trump Denies General Milley's Claims About Planning Coup: 'I'm Not Into Coups'

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump denied on Thursday the claim by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Mark Milley in a new book that he was planning a coup d'etat to take over the federal government rather than step down in January.

"So ridiculous! Sorry to inform you, but an election is my form of 'coup,' and if I was going to do a coup, one of the last people I would want to do it with is General Mark Milley," Trump said in his statement.

Trump said Milley "got his job only because the world's most overrated general, James Mattis, could not stand him, had no respect for him, and would not recommend him. To me the fact that Mattis didn't like him, just like Obama didn't like him and actually fired Milley, was a good thing, not a bad thing."

Trump also said Milley "choked like a dog" in front of the news media when he was criticized for walking publicly with the president.

"I saw at that moment he had no courage or skill, certainly not the type of person I would be talking 'coup' with. I'm not into coups!"

Trump said he believed Milley was a better politician than a general, "trying to curry favor with the radical Left."

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#### **EPA Must Ban 'Forever Chemicals' in Fracking Posing Cancer Risks – Prominent Doctor**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) – US federal and state governments must ban polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) used in fracking for oil and gas because of their health risks until investigations are completed, Dr. Helen Caldicott, founder of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) said on Thursday.

"Until testing and investigation are complete, EPA and states should not allow PFAS or chemicals that could break down into PFAS to be manufactured, imported, or used for oil and gas drilling or fracking," Caldicott said in an interview.

Caldicott, an Australian physician, has been one of the world's leading anti-nuclear activists for more than 40 years. She is the author of many books including "The New Nuclear Danger: George W. Bush's Military-Industrial Complex" and is a global expert on nuclear dangers to human health. The Smithsonian Institution has named her one of the most influential women of the 20th century.

Caldicott was commenting on a new PSR report released on Monday. The report warned that chemicals used in US fracking operations by companies including Chevron and ExxonMobil to extract oil and natural gas contain and can degrade into so-called forever chemicals that have been linked to cancer and birth defects.

"This report by Dusty Horwitt from PSR is one of the most comprehensive studies that I have seen about these so-called forever chemicals. The concerns that the study raises from a medical perspective are real indeed," Caldicott said.

The report documents that much of the relevant data concerning the public has been hidden both by the manufacturers and government agencies, she noted.

"As early as the 1960s and 1970s, researchers inside Dupont and 3M became aware that PFAS were associated with health problems including cancers and birth defects, had accumulated inside virtually every human being, and persisted in the environment," Caldicott observed.

A team of epidemiologists completed a study of the blood of 70,000 West Virginians and found that there was a probable link between such chemicals and kidney cancer, testicular cancer, thyroid, high cholesterol and inflammation and ulcers in the large intestine or colon, Caldicott said).

"Mounting evidence of PFAS's risks has led ten states to develop guidelines for concentrations in drinking water of PFOA and other types of PFAS. One of these states is Michigan, which acted because the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had not enacted federal drinking water standards for PFAS," she said.

Michigan's maximum allowable level of PFAS is no more than eight parts per trillion for PFOA (Perfluorooctanoic acid), a manufactured perfluorochemical and a byproduct in producing fluoropolymers, Caldicott pointed out.

"These standards indicate that one measuring cup of PFOA could contaminate almost 8 billion gallons of water, six times the 1.3 billion gallons of water used each day by New York City," she said.

The Centers for Disease Control and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry warned in June 2020 that many US communities are also concerned about how PFAS exposure may affect their risk of COVID-19 infection as exposure to high levels of PFAS may impact the immune system, Caldicott recalled.

"There is evidence from human and animal studies that PFAS exposure may reduce antibody responses to vaccines, and may reduce infectious disease resistance. Because COVID-19 is a new public health concern, there is still much we don't know," she said.

In 2020, Pennsylvania's Attorney General issued a report based on a criminal grand jury investigation of oil and gas drilling pollution in the state and found that many people living close to fracking well pads began to become chronically, and inexplicably, sick, Caldicott stated.

"Pets died; farm animals that lived outside started miscarrying, or giving birth to deformed offspring. But the worst according to PSR was the children were most susceptible to the effects," she said.

However, the major oil and gas companies involved would not even identify the chemicals they were using, saying the compounds were "trade secrets" and "proprietary information" and this absence of information created roadblocks to effective medical treatment, Caldicott said.

"EPA and/or states should evaluate through quantitative analysis whether PFAS and/or PFAS breakdown products associated with oil and gas operations have the capacity to harm human health," Caldictot advised.

The EPA and/or states should also determine where PFAS and chemicals that may be PFAS have been used in oil and gas operations and where related wastes have been deposited. They should test nearby water, soil, flora, and fauna for PFAS, she recommended.

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Ankara Hopes Gulen to Be Extradited Under Biden - Turkish Ambassador

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - Ankara is in close contact with Washington on the possible extradition of US-based Islamic cleric Fethullah Gulen and hopes it will happen under the Biden administration, Turkish Ambassador to the United States Hasan Murat Mercan told Sputnik on Thursday.

"Our relevant authorities and agencies are in close cooperation and dialogue with the American authorities, so I hope some day progress is made," Mercan said. "Of course, we want Fethullah Gulen (FETO) and his disciples to be extradited to Turkey... because Turkey and America are allies and we expect, we try to achieve that objective."

The Turkish government defines the transnational Islamic movement of Fethullah Gulen as FETO which is the acronym for Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organization.

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UN Urges Lebanon to Swiftly Form New Government - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, July 15 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is calling on Lebanon to swiftly form a new government capable of addressing the country's challenges after Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri resigned, UN Associate Spokesperson Eri Kaneko said during a press briefing on Thursday.

"We note that Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri has stood down from his function," Kaneko said. "We reiterate the call for the country's political leadership to swiftly agree on the formation of a new government that is able to address the country's numerous challenges."

Kaneko also said the United Nations regretted that Lebanon's leaders have so far been unable to agree on forming a government.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and his Special Coordinator for Lebanon Joanna Wronecka will continue to closely engage with relevant stakeholders in the country, Kaneko added.

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US State Dept. Refuses to Confirm Possibility of Establishing Emergency Hotline With China

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - The US State Department on Thursday refused to confirm the possibility of establishing an emergency hotline with China, but said the United States is interested in being able to manage the competition between the two countries.

"We'll decline to discuss any internal discussions on this. But generally speaking, of course we have an interest in ensuring that competition with China is managed in a responsible way," the State Department told Sputnik.

Earlier on Thursday, US media reported that the Biden administration is examining the possibility of setting up a hotline with the Chinese government similar to the so-called "red phone" established between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The State Department added that the United States continues to work to ensure its stiff competition with China "doesn't veer into conflict."

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**US Offers \$10M In Reward for Information on Foreign-Sponsored Cyber Attacks - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - The US government is intensifying efforts to curb the recent surge in cyber attacks by introducing a \$10 million bounty for information on such attacks directed by foreign governments as well as by launching the first web hub devoted to ransomware, the US Department of State Rewards for Justice program said on Thursday. "The US Department of State's Rewards for Justice program, which is administered by the Diplomatic Security Service, is offering a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading to the identification or location of any person who, while acting at the direction or under the control of a foreign government, participates in malicious cyber activities against US critical infrastructure in violation of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA)," the statement said. In addition, the departments of Justice and Homeland Security launched on Wednesday a new consolidated web resource, StopRansomware.gov, to help individuals and businesses combat the threat of ransomware. The resource provides information for users on how to reduce the ransomware risk by protecting networks, the Justice Department said in a release. StopRansomware.gov also provides tools to report ransomware attacks to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency or the US Secret Service. "It is critical for business leaders across industries to recognize the threat [of ransomware], prioritize efforts to harden their systems and work with law enforcement by reporting these attacks promptly," Attorney General Merrick Garland was cited as saying in the release. The US authorities have reported an increase in the number of ransomware attacks. The Justice Department estimates that some \$350 million have been paid in ransom to cyber criminals in 2020 alone, a 300 percent increase from 2019, according to the release.

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**Anyone Attempting to Jeopardize Political Process in Libya May Face Sanctions - Le Drian**  
UNITED NATIONS, July 15 (Sputnik) - French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian said on Thursday anyone who attempts to jeopardize the political process and holding of the Libyan general election later this year might be subjected to sanctions. "It is vitally imperative that the electoral calendar be respected, and the legislative and presidential elections must take place on December 24," Le Drian said during a UN Security Council meeting on the situation in Libya.

"This calendar is a cornerstone of the transition process. We must in no way budge on the date of December 24, whatever the reason may be. Anyone who attempts to jeopardize the political process may be designated for sanctions," he said.

Le Drian said the date for holding the election was disputed by some Libyan Political Dialogue Forum participants held in Geneva earlier this month.

He further reminded the date was fixed by the Political Dialogue Forum, endorsed by the relevant UN Security Council resolution and the Berlin Conference held on June 23. Last fall, Libyan rivals held UN-facilitated talks in Geneva, which ended with signing a nationwide ceasefire agreement. In early February, the Swiss-hosted round of intra-Libyan talks led to the election of an interim Government of National Unity that will be in charge until the December 24 election.

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Daily 'Screen Time' Lowers IQ of 6, 7-Year Olds Who Were Born Preterm – US Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) – More than two hours of looking at video screens daily appears to aggravate cognitive and behavioral problems for children born early during pregnancy by the time they reach school age, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) said in a report on Thursday.

“Among 6- and 7-year-olds who were born extremely preterm — before the 28th week of pregnancy — those who had more than two hours of screen time a day were more likely to have deficits in overall IQ, executive functioning (problem solving skills), impulse control and attention,” NIH said in a press release explaining the report.

Similarly, those who had a television or computer in their bedrooms were more likely to have problems with impulse control and paying attention, the release said.

The findings suggest that high amounts of screen time may exacerbate the cognitive deficits and behavioral problems common to children born extremely preterm, the release added.

The report was published in the medical journal JAMA Pediatrics, according to NIH.

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NATO Command for Battle of Atlantic Declared Fully Operational

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - NATO's newest command and the only one located in the United States officially reached on Thursday its full operational capability with a mission to fight the Battle of Atlantic in any future armed conflict between the world's greatest powers.

Joint Force Command (JFC) Norfolk comprises representatives from 21 nations and relies on the US Second Fleet, reactivated three years ago in response to a perceived growth of Russia's military threat, as its backbone.

“Today is the day we are declaring full operational capability... And it is the mission of this command to fight the Battle of the Atlantic in the event of armed conflict. Think about that for a minute,” US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley at the ceremony.

Milley warned that the world may be entering "a period of potential instability" with "some nations, terrorist groups and rogue actors" challenging the existing international order established 76 years ago to prevent another global conflict.

"In 1945, people throughout the world said, 'Never Again.' So they set up processes and policies and laws, organizations that today we commonly refer to as the international order. And the goal is to prevent another great power war... That order is under intense and growing stress," Milley said.

He added that the key to a success in a potential new war is new military technologies and the US has 10 to 15 years to master them.

"There is a set of technologies that are driving fundamental change. And if we in the United States military, NATO... do not adapt and adopt these technologies, if we don't get there firstest and mostest, if we don't put the pedal to the metal and do this right over the next 10 to 15 years, we are condemning a future generation to what happened 76 years ago," he said.

He assured that the US is still the most powerful military in the world and warned any adversaries against attempts to challenge its resolve.

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#### **Blue Origin Selects 18-Year-Old as First 'Paying' Space Tourist in Inaugural Flight**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - An 18-year-old amateur astronaut will become the first paying customer for Blue Origin, as the private space-tourism company sends its first humans into space on July 20.

"Oliver Daemen will be the first paying customer to fly on board New Shepard, marking the beginning of commercial operations for the program," Blue Origins said in a press release via Twitter.

Daemen will join billionaire US entrepreneur Jeff Bezos, his brother Mark Bezos and Wally Funk aboard the first human flight scheduled for Tuesday, July 20, the release said.

Daemen, the winner of an auction for the spacecraft's single open seat, will set a record as the youngest person in space, the release added.

Bezos earlier invited Funk, who at age 82 will be the oldest person ever to leave Earth.

Funk trained to become NASA's first female astronaut during the Project Mercury era but never made it to space.

Blue Origin created a vertical takeoff and landing system called New Shepard in a bid to open outer space to tourists. The system consists of a rocket designed to jettison a crew capsule at a height of more than 60 miles. The capsule then lingers in zero gravity space for several minutes before returning to earth in a parachute-assisted landing.

Billionaire Richard Branson launched himself and three others into space last week on his Virgin Galactic spacecraft, beating Bezos as the first commercial space-tourism company to get off the ground.

Fellow billionaire Elon Musk hopes to send his first space tourist aloft in a reusable SpaceX Dragon capsule in September.

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#### **UN Rights Chief Says Alarmed by Belarus Security Forces' Raids on Rights Activists Offices**

UNITED NATIONS, July 15 (Sputnik) - UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said on Thursday that she was alarmed by reports that the Belarus security services raided the offices of human rights organizations and journalists and have detained several activists.

"I am deeply alarmed at the latest developments in Belarus, where on Wednesday the security forces carried out dozens of raids on the offices and homes of human rights activists and journalists, and a number of people were reported to have been detained," Bachelet said. The UN High Commissioner called on Belarus to immediately release those individuals who are still detained.

"I have repeatedly warned about the deteriorating situation in Belarus and call once again on the government to cease their policy of intimidating and harassing civil society and media workers," Bachelet said.

On Wednesday, the Belarusian Justice Ministry initiated the suspension of the activities of the opposition association Movement For Freedom.

Another Belarusian opposition organization, the human rights center Viasna - which is not officially registered - said law enforcement officers searched the homes of some of its members and could not reach out to its chief Ales Bialiatski.

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#### **UN Preparing for First Phase of Ceasefire Monitors' Deployment Into Libya - Special Envoy**

UNITED NATIONS, July 15 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is currently preparing for the first phase of deploying a team of international monitors to observe the implementation of the ceasefire in Libya, UN Special Envoy for the country Jan Kubis told the UN Security Council on Thursday.

"Preparations are ongoing for the deployment of an UNSMIL [UN Support Mission in Libya] ceasefire monitoring component in support of the Libyan-led, Libyan-owned Ceasefire Monitoring Mechanism," Kubis said. "The [UN] Secretariat is currently preparing for the first phase of deployment or ceasefire monitors, including with the recruitment of personnel and procurement of enabling elements."

The special envoy explained that once the necessary financial resources are secured, the Secretariat will reach out to member states to support the full deployment of the arsenal ceasefire monitoring component.

However, it is not clear yet when the Libyan component of the mechanism will be in place, Kubis said.

In June, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said during the international conference on Libya in Berlin that the initial group of monitors will soon travel to Tripoli.

The departure of a team of monitors was authorized by a UN Security Council resolution adopted in April following Guterres' proposal to establish such a monitoring mechanism in Libya. According to Guterres' proposal, the monitoring team will operate within the UNSMIL and will be set up of a maximum of 60 unarmed individuals.

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#### **US, Russia Intend to Work Bilaterally on Climate Issues, Including Emissions – Statement**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry and his Russian counterpart Ruslan Edelgeriyev are committed to working together on a range of climate issues, including carbon and non-carbon emissions reduction, the State Department said on Thursday.

"They also intend to work together bilaterally on a range of climate-related issues. Topics will include, among others, satellite monitoring of emissions and removals of greenhouse gases; forests and agriculture; climate and the Arctic, including black carbon; reducing emissions from non-CO2 gases, including methane; enhanced nationally determined contributions and long-term strategies under the Paris Agreement; energy efficiency; climate finance; nature-based solutions; and implementation of joint climate projects," the Department said in a release.

Kerry and Edelgeriyev agreed that the climate challenge should be addressed with seriousness and urgency while both countries are committed to implementing the Paris Climate Agreement and its goals of reducing temperatures as well as targeting of net-zero emissions on a global scale, the release said.

The two representatives also agreed to promote the 26th Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow as well as cooperate on climate-related issues in the Arctic.

John Kerry is visiting Moscow to meet with Russian officials and discuss climate-related issues. On Monday, Kerry met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who said the US special envoy's visit was an important and positive signal" for US-Russia relations, On Wednesday, Kerry spoke over the telephone with Russian President Vladimir Putin who also stressed the importance of achieving the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement.

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#### **More Progress Needed From Ukraine for New IMF Tranche - Spokesman**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) wants to see more progress from Ukraine in order to provide it a new tranche, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"We welcome recent approval on laws that will strengthen judicial system in Ukraine but more progress is needed in several other areas to support completion of the First Review of the IMF-supported program," Rice said at the press briefing.

The fund remains closely engaged with Ukraine on implementing the policies and reforms needed to move forward under the current stand-by arrangement, he added.

"Our discussions with the authorities will be continuing," Rice promised.

The IMF approved the \$5-billion program in June 2020 and immediately provided \$2.1 billion.

The rest of the funding was made conditional upon Ukraine's satisfactory progress on the outlined criteria. The original schedule of further payments entailed four \$700-million installments - two in late 2020 and two during 2021 - but none were wired so far.

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US Appoints Veteran European Affairs Diplomat to Major UK Embassy Post – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration has appointed Philip Reeker, a veteran US diplomat and European affairs expert as Charge d'Affaires in its embassy to the United Kingdom, the Department of State announced on Thursday.

"Ambassador Philip Reeker will serve as Chargé d'Affaires, ad interim, at the Embassy of the United States of America to the Court of St. James's [in London], as of August 1," the department said in a diplomatic note.

Reeker is a career diplomat with the rank of Minister-Counselor and currently serves as Acting Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, the State Department said.

Prior to leading the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, Reeker was Civilian Deputy and Policy Advisor to the Commander of US European Command in Stuttgart, Germany, and from 2008-2011 he was US Ambassador to North Macedonia.

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Health 'Misinformation' Prolongs Pandemic by Reducing US Vaccinations – Surgeon General

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) – Health misinformation, including disinformation, continue to prevent Americans from getting vaccinated, prolonging the pandemic and putting lives at risk, US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy warned on Thursday.

"Health misinformation is an urgent threat to public health. It can cause confusion, sow mistrust, and undermine public health efforts, including our ongoing work to end the COVID-19

pandemic," Murthy said in a health advisory. "From the tech and social media companies who must do more to address the spread on their platforms, to all of us identifying and avoiding sharing misinformation, tackling this challenge will require an all-of-society approach, but it is critical for the long-term health of our nation."

The advisory cited a recent analysis of millions of social media posts, which showed that false stories were 70 percent more likely to be shared than true stories.

Another study showed that even brief exposure to misinformation made people less likely to want a COVID-19 vaccine, the advisory said.

The Surgeon General oversees the US Public Health Service Commissioned Corps (USPHS), a group of over 6,000 uniformed officers whose mission is to protect, promote, and advance the health of our nation, according to a Department of Health and Human Services website.

The advisory coincides with declining vaccination rates in the United States and low vaccine coverage in several states, which officials blame for a sharp rise in new COVID-19 infections in several regions of the US.

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#### IMF Engaged with Haitian Authorities in Bid to Achieve Stability - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is engaging with Haitian authorities in order to help maintain stability in the wake of President Jovenel Moise's assassination, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"We are engaged with officials in Haiti to support the country's institutions trying help them foster social and economic stability," Rice said.

He added that the institution hopes to work closely with the nation's government to "promote economic growth and poverty reduction."

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#### US Deputy Secretary Sherman to Visit Japan, South Korea, Mongolia from July 18-25

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - US Deputy State Secretary Wendy Sherman is due to travel to Japan, South Korea and Mongolia from July 18-25 to discuss a wide range of issues with the countries' leaders, the State Department said on Thursday.

"Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman will travel to Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and Mongolia from July 18 to July 25," the statement said.

As part of the trip, Sherman will hold a joint meeting with the top diplomats of Japan and South Korea to "discuss trilateral cooperation on pressing shared challenges, including regional security issues such as the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea], as well as climate change and global health."

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**US, Russia Intend to Work Bilaterally on Climate Issues, Including Emissions – Statement**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) – US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry and Russian Special Presidential Representative on Climate Issues Ruslan Edelgeriyev are committed to working together on a range of climate issues, including carbon and non-carbon emissions reduction, the State Department said on Thursday.

"They [US and Russia representatives] also intend to work together bilaterally on a range of climate-related issues. Topics will include, among others, satellite monitoring of emissions and removals of greenhouse gases; forests and agriculture; climate and the Arctic, including black carbon; reducing emissions from non-CO2 gases, including methane; enhanced nationally determined contributions and long-term strategies under the Paris Agreement; energy efficiency; climate finance; nature-based solutions; and implementation of joint climate projects," the Department said in a release.

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**US, Russia Say They Recognize Need To Address Increasing Climate Challenge With Urgency**

MOSCOW, July 15 (Sputnik) - The United States and Russia acknowledge the need to address the increasing challenge rising from climate change with urgency, a joint statement from US climate envoy John Kerry and his Russian equal, Ruslan Edelgeriyev, said on Thursday.

"U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry and Russian Special Presidential Representative on Climate Issues Ruslan Edelgeriyev recognize the need to address the increasing climate challenge with seriousness and urgency," the statement said.

Kerry is concluding a four-day official visit to Moscow, Russia as the highest Biden administration visit to Russia so far.

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**Emissions From Global Power Sector to Rise as Renewables Fail to Keep Up With Demand – IEA**

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) – Growth of renewable energy sources will fall short of increases in electricity demand as the world recovers from the pandemic, resulting in a rise in

carbon emissions from the power sector from expanded use of fossil fuels, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said in a report on Thursday.

Based on current policy settings and economic trends, electricity generation from renewables – including hydropower, wind and solar – is on track to grow strongly around the world over the next two years – by 8 percent in 2021 and by more than 6 percent in 2022, according to IEA's the semi-annual "Electricity Market Report."

"But even with this strong growth, renewables will only be able to meet around half the projected increase in global electricity demand over those two years," an IEA press release summarizing the report said.

The Asia-Pacific region, especially China and India, will likely account for most of the projected increase in global electricity demand, resulting in a 5 percent rise in coal-fired power production this year and a further 3 percent in 2022, the release added.

As a result, carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions from the electricity sector – which fell in both 2019 and 2020 – are forecast to increase by 3.5 percent in 2021 and by 2.5 percent in 2022, which would take them to an all-time high, the IEA said.

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#### Three Children Killed in Northwest Syria This Morning Amid Escalating Violence - UNICEF

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Sputnik) - Three children have been killed in northwest Syria Thursday morning amid growing violence, Ted Chaiban, UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa said in a statement on Thursday.

"Violence is escalating in northwest Syria amid an increase of children killed and injured," Chaiban said. "UNICEF confirms that only this morning, three children were killed in two separate attacks in the area. The attacks have taken place in the de-escalation zone despite the ceasefire from March last year."

Chaiban pointed out that in the past two weeks at least 10 children have been verified killed in Syria.

"This is a terrifying sign that violence is coming back to Syria. Communities face a serious risk of losing the little respite they had during the lull in violence," he said.

"Violence and any resumption of hostilities will take the Syrian people further away from reaching a peaceful and political solution to end the bloodshed and solve the decade-long crisis in Syria."

Syria has been in the grip of an armed conflict since 2011. Though victory over the Islamic State (a terrorist group banned in Russia) was announced in 2017, anti-terrorist missions are ongoing in certain areas of Syria and Iraq. Current priorities include political reconciliation, restoration of the country and the return of refugees.